MYSTICISM: ITS TRUE NATURE AND VALUE

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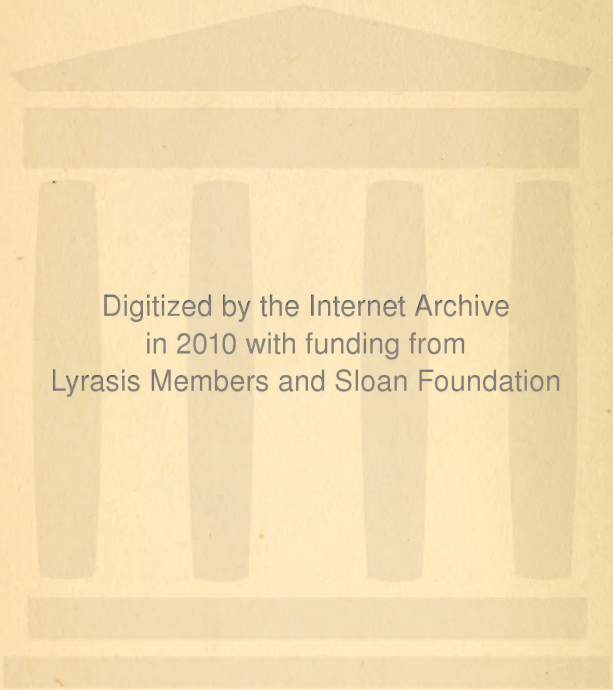
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MYSTICISM: ITS TRUE NATURE AND VALUE

IMPRIMI POTEST.

JACOBUS AUGUSTINUS,

ARCHIEP. S. ANDR. ET EDIMBURGEN.

EDIMBURGI, DIE 18 *Julii* 1910.

MYSTICISM:

ITS TRUE NATURE AND VALUE

WITH A TRANSLATION OF THE "MYSTICAL THEOLOGY" OF DIONYSIUS, AND OF THE LETTERS TO CAIUS AND DOROTHEUS (1, 2 AND 5)

BY

A. B. SHARPE, M.A.

"Ο θεῖος γνόφος ἐστὶ τὸ ἀπρόσιτον φῶς ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται."

—Dionysius, *Ep.* 5 *ad Dorotheum.*

"Aliis loquor communia, aliis specialia ; aliquibus in signis et figuris dulciter appareo ; quibusdam vero in multo lumine revelo mysteria."—*De Imitatione Christi*, 3. 43.

SECOND EDITION.

WITH INTRODUCTION AND APPENDICES.

LONDON
SANDS & COMPANY
15 KING STREET, COVENT GARDEN
AND EDINBURGH

ST. LOUIS MO.
B. HERDER.

~~248~~
~~S532~~

BV5082
S53
1910a

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" Così la mente mia tutta sospesa
Mirava fissa immobile ed attenta,
E sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.

A quella luce cotal si diventa,
Che volgersi da lei, per altro aspetto,
È impossibil che mai si consenta ;

Perocchè 'l ben, ch'è del volere obbietto
Tutto s'accoglie in lei ; e fuor di quella
È difettivo ciò ch' è lì perfetto."

DANTE, *Paradiso*, cxxxiii..

INTRODUCTION

Most people have only a very vague notion of what is to be understood by mysticism. The word is generally applied to anything beyond the range of ordinary sense-experience, or to any occurrence which sense-experience does not immediately seem to explain. The way in which this common use of the word is connected with its original meaning will be pointed out later. But it is of some importance to notice what the things or occurrences are that in the popular language of the present day are called mystical. These are very various, but they may be classified somewhat as follows. First, there is magic, in all its forms, ancient, mediæval and modern. Next there comes what is now called spiritualism, or the attempt to communicate with immaterial but rational beings, who are believed to have some power

of influencing the visible world. Thirdly, there are the various emotions, of a more or less obscure kind, which are excited in the mind by associations connected with natural objects, familiar sights and sounds, or strange and sudden events; these are experienced in greater or less degree by everyone, but their origin and development are not always readily traceable. Fourthly, there is a derivative sense of the word in which it is applied to modes of speech or action, apparently directed to some hidden or obscure object, which do not directly indicate, but rather seem to suggest something in itself impalpable or transcendental.[1]

Thus the rites of savage religions, the incantations which found a place in the prescriptions of mediæval physicians, the pretensions of astrology and of alchemy and of sorcery and witchcraft, share the title with the feats of clairvoyants and "mediums," with the claims of faith-healing and of thought-reading; and again with the vague emotions

[1] See *e.g.*, Disraeli's *Endymion*, ch. xxvi., "There is a mystic bond between us, originating perhaps in the circumstance of our birth; for we are twins," and ch. xxxv., "She asked questions in a hushed mystical voice."

aroused by a brilliant sunset or by mountain scenery, by music, or by the memories associated with a well-known place. So even a whispered word, a solemn tone of voice, and even a conjuring trick, is often, by the derivative (though doubtfully legitimate) use of the word, described as mystical.

In quite another direction, again, mysticism has been brought into connection with a certain school of metaphysics, as a kind of direct intuition by means of which the absolute reality underlying the phenomenal world may be perceived and contemplated; and this intuition is held by some to be the true essence of mysticism, as the common and only reality belonging to all kinds of mystical experience.

Lastly, the mysticism recognised by the Catholic Church as genuine is the direct intellectual communication of God with the soul. This is due not to any natural endowment or effort of the mystic, but to the favour of God alone; though this favour is granted, ordinarily, only to those who have prepared themselves to receive it, and who

may therefore be said in a certain sense to be specially qualified for it.

It seems well to indicate, by way of introduction, the real significance of the confusion in which the subject is still commonly involved; a confusion which is due, unquestionably, to certain congenital tendencies of the human mind in its perpetual contact with an environment of which its understanding, though always imperfect, grows constantly deeper and wider.

It is certain that all human beings have a natural desire or tendency to seek for some explanation of the various objects which surround them, both animate and inanimate. This desire arises, no doubt, primarily from man's dependence on his surroundings, and his want, at least for practical purposes, of those primitive instincts by means of which other animals are enabled to make provision for their needs, and to avoid the dangers that constantly threaten them. For these purposes man has to rely mainly on the reasoning power which distinguishes him from the lower animals. He has, therefore, from the first, set himself to

discover the various uses to which natural objects may be put, and the means that may enable him to avoid premature destruction by hostile powers. The desire of knowledge for its own sake is a less potent and far less universal cause of enquiry; it may probably, indeed, have no independent source, but be merely an aspect or outcome of the practical need. However that may be, the chronic desire of the human race for an understanding of its environment, and its increasing efforts in pursuit of such an understanding, are unquestionable. Now the method by which knowledge is sought is always the explanation of the unknown by the known: no other method is, indeed, available. Therefore uncultivated and uncivilised man has necessarily to use his very small stock of knowledge as his instrument for reducing the vast proportions of his ignorance. The first thing of which all men acquire a clear conception is themselves. Self is the first thing that stands out clear-cut against the confused background of the not-self; and the self is almost immediately perceived to be something more than the mere

body, since it is endowed with the powers of thinking, of feeling and of willing—powers in which the bodily organism seems to have no direct share, but to which it appears to be in some way subject. A man's invisible and intangible thoughts, desires, and intentions are, or appear to be, the causes of the movements of his body; and when he sets out to interpret to himself the impressions he receives from surrounding objects of all kinds, he naturally applies to them the only criterion he possesses, namely, his experience of himself. Thus he is led to attribute the movements of objects over which he has no control to a cause like that which he has already been led by experience to assign for the bodily movements which depend on the invisible controlling power within himself. As, then, man finds by experience that the motive power of his own body is supplied by the immaterial co-efficient of his nature which we call soul or spirit, so by an inevitable inference he attributes the movements and actions of persons and things other than himself to a similar invisible and intangible power within or behind them. The inference

is like that which he makes about other human beings, and which he knows they make about himself; it is very far from an unreasonable one, and in its main features is perfectly correct. We need not, indeed, suppose that the precise idea of an immaterial soul as it is now conceived, or of immaterial as distinct from corporeal existence, is distinctly present to the mind of primitive man. It would seem that, in some instances at least, he has only a general and vague notion of all-pervading power, manifested in material things by various means, and in various degrees.[1] But even so, the mere notion of power as something real, though beyond the purview of the senses, has in it at least the rudimentary concept of spirit. The primitive mind does not seek to analyse its confused ideas, and does not, at first, attempt to associate its notion of the power exhibited in material things with any particular kind of vehicle, such as the individual soul. Nevertheless, the essential idea is there, and we may safely conclude that the primitive or savage conception of the universe is in a wide sense

[1] See A. Lang, *Origins of Religion*.

animistic, *i.e.*, it attributes to all things alike, in different degrees, the possession of an invisible and intangible power, closely resembling that of which human beings are conscious in themselves.

It is then but a short step from the belief in the existence of spiritual, or quasi-spiritual, power to the attempt to make use of it. It would seem in fact, as we have remarked, that the general animistic notion of the world is obtained in the course of a quest for knowledge which may be turned to practical use. As therefore uncivilised man makes use of his material surroundings to obtain food, warmth and shelter, so he inevitably endeavours to make use, in their own sphere, of the spiritual powers by which he thinks the world is animated. Hence arises the primitive notion of magic, or the art and science of dealing directly with the hidden and spiritual qualities of things, apart from the mechanical methods by which the things, in their external aspects, are converted to human uses. This is the fundamental notion of magic in all the numberless forms it has assumed in the history of mankind. It contains

in germ and in confusion all the different sciences in which the whole experience of the race has since been formulated. Magic is in fact rudimentary science, theology and mysticism all in one.

The savage doctor drives out the occult quality, or invisible spirit of disease, from his patient by means of charms and incantations, which are not supposed to have any direct or mechanical effect on the disordered parts. They are intended to drive out the hidden cause or agent to which the sickness is attributed. The treatment is, in principle, thoroughly scientific; it declines to deal with symptoms, and attacks the supposed origin of the trouble. The only mistake about it is that it is founded on a diagnosis which goes rather too far; but the medicine-man's procedure is quite reasonable in view of his limited knowledge. Or again, primitive man at a certain stage of development believes that the whole world is worked by supernatural agents, acting on motives like his own, and liable, like himself, to be moved by appeals to their fears, their pity and their hopes. Through them, there-

fore, he supposes that he possesses unlimited powers of influencing the course of nature to his own advantage. Prayers, promises or threats may secure for him sunshine or rain, abundant crops and success in hunting or in war.[1] Hence the system of taboos, by which the anger of the god is averted, and his good-will secured. Here we have, jumbled together, the scientific principle which aims at the control of nature through a knowledge of its processes; the theological concept of the government of the world by a spiritual being or beings; and the rudiments of the mystical notion of some kind of direct communication with the unseen, the prime condition of which is already perceived to be the removal of obstacles, even though the nature of the real obstacles to be removed is far from being rightly understood.

The process of scientific, moral and religious education through which mankind has passed, and is still passing, is thus evidently one of differentiation. It seem improbable, however, that the process is chronologically continuous

[1] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, vol. i. p. 8.

for the whole race; degeneration has probably quite as much to do with the present state of savage races as imperfect development; and there is no evidence to negative the supposition that the animism of the savage is ultimately due to a primitive revelation now well-nigh forgotten. But the educational process is clearly traceable within specific limits of place and time; and in its main features it consists in the disentanglement and consequent advance of departments of knowledge which first appear in a single confused mass. Development is from confusion to distinction of thought.[1]

This process of development has been a very gradual one; it is still far from complete in itself, and it has by no means uniformly affected the whole of mankind either socially or individually. It was long before either theology or science could be fully emancipated from the presuppositions of magic. The chemist, the astronomer, the physician and the mathematician were for many centuries regarded, and indeed regarded themselves, as

[1] Marett, *Anthropology*, p. 239.

occultists or magicians, on one side, at least, of their researches; though on another side they were true experimentalists. The two points of view were curiously intermingled and combined in ancient and mediæval science and philosophy, the *a priori* assumptions of earlier times being brought in to fill the gaps in the fragmentary and tentative scientific theories of the time. The first to be conscious of this incongruity was Bacon, who supposed that nature would yield up her secrets only to a system of unprejudiced "interrogation," thereby overstepping the mark in one direction almost by as much as his predecessors had in the other. Mere interrogation of nature is, of course, impossible; what the Novum Organon left out of account was the necessity of some kind of creative imagination for the direction of experiment. But Bacon was the first to state clearly the distinction between the construction of verifiable hypotheses and the *a priori* assumption of unverifiable theories as facts—a distinction which has never since been wholly lost sight of.

A clearly marked stage in the advance from

confusion to distinction of thought appears in the theology of Iamblichus.[1] He held that there were two sorts of gods—the higher, or purely spiritual, who were the proper object of the spiritual contemplation that only a select few are capable of; and the lower gods and demons, whose nature was something between the purely spiritual and the wholly material—removed on the one hand by their spirituality from the direct knowledge of mankind, and on the other hand, separated from that of the higher gods by its admixture of the nature of earthly things. Material sacrifices were due to the lower gods, and all men were free to propitiate them by this means; they were not, like the higher gods, the patrons of an exclusive class. Here we see the primitive conception of animism divided, and then somewhat curiously cross-divided.

With Paracelsus again, and the later mediæval physicists, the animistic assumption takes a different and less transcendental form. Paracelsus conceived all material existence as a hierarchy, rising in successive degrees of

[1] *Egyptian Mysteries*, v. 14.

refinement to the immediate presence of God. The highest degree is reached in the "quintessence" of things, which is a "moist fire," serving as a kind of mask or screen to the divine presence. Lower down in the scale are the "essences" of things, in which are highly sublimated elements called "virtues," capable of being extracted and of entering into combination with one another. Certain of them possess a dominating power, in virtue of which they are "magisteries" and attract others of the same kind to themselves, as the virtue of vinegar attracts and dominates the virtue of wine. This is the way in which drugs were supposed to act on the human body, and anticipates the homœopathic principle of infinitesimal doses.[1] Paracelsus's directions for producing the desired results contain an odd mixture of chemical formulæ and magical incantations. We may see in this cosmic theory a further advance towards distinctness of thought. Quintessence, essence and virtue are not either wholly or partially spiritual; yet they are not strictly material or organic; they

[1] Paracelsus, *Theophrastia* (Archidoxies vi.).

are mere names, concealing a wide ignorance of natural processes since discovered, and confusing those processes with the all pervading energy of nature to which they are due, and which is still as far as ever from being understood.

Another striking instance of the confusion, as yet only partially resolved, of man's outlook on the universe is to be found in the relation long supposed to exist between the "microcosm" of the human body, and the "macrocosm" of the solar system. The heavenly bodies were believed to be in natural sympathy with the human organism, and to exert special influences upon it. The sun acted on the heart, the moon on the "animal humours." Hence a considerable part of mediæval therapeutics was concerned with the movements of the planets, with the object of transmitting their virtue to the patient at the most favourable moment.[1] Animism had receded to a very great extent from the earth, but still lingered among the stars.

The process of distinction goes on with con-

[1] v. Cardan, *De varietate rerum*, &c.

stantly increasing momentum. Our own days have witnessed the birth of several new sciences, each the legitimate offspring of a parent science, and each, no doubt, to be in turn the mother of more. Mysticism is the final step, in one direction, of the differentiating process. As God, the personal and transcendent Creator, is the ultimate term of metaphysics, so the mystical or immediate knowledge of God is the ultimate of that relation of the human soul to Him, as its source, object and end, which constitutes religion. This finality, however, implies more than a natural process of development. Side by side with the growth of natural knowledge, and intermingled with it, has always stood a divinely imparted revelation. Its influence is to be traced, not only in the spiritual experiences of the descendants of Abraham, and in the fuller light of the Catholic Church, but also in sidelights, off-shoots and reactionary movements, often alien and sometimes directly hostile to it. But when God had once made Himself known to man, the way to personal and direct intercourse was open; knowledge

could be translated into experience. St. Paul's mystical experience was as complete and final as the faith that he taught.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that all mankind have not reached the same stage in their progress from confusion to distinction of thought; nor is the progress continuous. Reactions and reversions, as well as cases of arrested development, occur in this as in other phases of human history. In the advance of human knowledge and experience from the pre-scientific to the scientific stage, or from confusion to distinction in the apprehension of facts, there has occurred, as was to be expected, a kind of precipitation of superfluous or effete ideas. These have continued to exist, and to exert an influence, more or less recognisable, upon the minds alike of the civilised and the uncivilised, the wise and the foolish, the learned and the unlearned. Human nature is always fundamentally the same, and the primeval tendency to envisage our surroundings as a confused medley of material and spiritual elements, reasserts itself sometimes in the most unexpected places. A sudden shock to the

feelings will often throw the most cultivated persons back to the savage state of mind in which the unexpected or the unexplained excites emotions of confused wonder or terror, with an undercurrent of hardly realised suggestion of supernatural agency. Many people who have no belief in ghosts are terribly afraid of them, and are quite capable, under appropriate circumstances, of imagining that they see them. The civilised habits of reflection and analysis generally prevail, after the first moment, over the sudden emotion. But more often than not, at the instant of receiving a sudden blow, or witnessing a sudden catastrophe, or receiving important or unexpected news, either painful or pleasurable, we get a momentary glimpse of ourselves in the mental condition of primitive man. Again, the practice of magic and witchcraft is still far from unknown even in the centres of European civilisation; and many persons who feel themselves superior to any form of religious belief, still associate good or bad luck with certain trivial actions and events. Many people still feel uncomfortable if they happen to tread on

the joint of two paving stones, or if they have to pass under a ladder; the "envy of the gods" is still averted by ejaculating "unberufen und unbeschrieen," or some such phrase; and belief in the power of the evil eye is as seriously and almost as widely entertained now as it was in the days of St. Thomas Aquinas.

In fact the vaguely mystical attitude of mind in which primitive man views everything around him lies dormant in all of us, and on occasion will come uppermost; just as the savage passions which have been trained and disciplined into the manners and customs of civilised life will on occasion break out in all their primitive crudity. But the undeveloped and untaught mystical tendency is no more true mysticism than the primitive savage emotions are habits of virtue or good manners. To this primitive source we must trace the common tendency to apply the title of mystical to almost anything that seems unusual or difficult of explanation. More especially, the surviving confusion of the primitive mind is to be recognised in the emotional apprehension of objects of beauty or interest, as symbolising

something beyond themselves which is their cause and which gives them their deeper meaning. So to appreciate nature, history or art is to follow the mystical tendency which is inherent in human nature, and without which the existence of actual mysticism could scarcely be conceived as possible. But the mystical tendency is not mysticism; just as the rudimentary elements of science contained in primitive conceptions of nature were not yet actually scientific.

Spiritualism, even if its claims to be considered a genuine science are admitted, falls far short of the position of true mysticism. The beings with whom it deals (if, indeed, they have any real existence) are not supposed to represent the supreme controlling power of the universe, nor is the alleged communication with them direct; it takes place, if at all, through "materialisations," the body of a "medium," or the instrumentality of domestic furniture. Spiritualism may be considered as a stage, possibly a retrogressive one, in the evolution of the mystical tendency; it has certainly nothing in common with true mysticism.

But the attempted connection of Christian mysticism with idealistic pantheism raises special difficulties of its own. On this theory, which has recently found some favour with an undiscerning public, it appears to be held that there is a transcendental sphere into which exceptionally gifted minds have been able to penetrate, but which is not—as, of course, in the pantheistic view it could not be—that immediate presence of a personal God which Christian mystics believed that they enjoyed. Their belief in the divine Trinity and the Incarnate Son was, it is thought, merely a part of the subjective medium through which their consciousness of the transcendental reality had to pass, and which gave its own form and colour to their mystical experience. The "dry light" of the Absolute is, in this view, stained by the preconceptions of the mind which contemplates it. We may, therefore, abstract all such preconceptions of whatever kind—whether founded on revelation, philosophic speculation or theosophic insight—and consider the residuum as the one essential and all-pervading element of mystical vision.

This residuum is held to be the inner reality of nature, the stable foundation on which the kaleidoscopic changes of the universe take place, and in which the changing elements themselves are substantially comprehended. The phenomenal experience of mankind in general is fragmentary; but the mystic contemplates all things in their totality; he envisages the greatest common measure of the universe as a single luminous point, from which the various elements of the cosmos, ideal or material, perpetually radiate, and in which they are all at the same time concentrated. Thus it is supposed that the mystic enters into a kind of impersonal union with the essence of things, or rather realises that union in a sphere higher than that of personality. It matters nothing, accordingly, what the subjective medium may be through which the transcendental vision passes—that is merely the soul-language in terms of which the true object is expressed; and the actual object of mystical contemplation is for Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and Mohammedan precisely one and the same. So stated, it is not to be denied that the theory

has a certain plausibility. But here are the difficulties.

First, we have, and can have, no direct evidence in the matter but the accounts given by the mystics themselves of their own experience. But if we are to accept one part of this account, on what ground may we reject another part, when our authorities agree in regarding both as equally certain? If, for instance, we may refuse credit to St. Teresa's explicit statement that she had a direct intuition of the Holy Trinity, have we any right to believe that she had any intuition at all? We have only her bare word, in any case, to go by. If it is replied that we are justified in accepting the statements in which all so-called mystics agree, while we are bound to reject those in which they mutually differ; we must inquire what, after all, it is that they agree in? What is the common ground in St. Paul's vision of the seventh heaven; Schopenhauer's contemplation of the "kernel" of the universe; Julian of Norwich's inexplicable explanation of the divine justice, the abstraction of the Hesychast or the Buddhist monk, the trances of

Mohammed, the ecstasy of Plotinus, and all the endless other varieties of abnormal religious or quasi-religious experience? The most we can say is that they all saw, or thought they saw, something. But their accounts of it are so various as to be mutually destructive; they cannot, logically, be supposed to have seen the same thing. But if they did not all see the same thing, two conclusions only are possible—either each saw what he thought he saw, or no one saw anything. The two conclusions are, of course, easily reconcileable by supposing that the vision in every case was produced by the imagination of the visionary, and had no external reality—each saw what he supposed himself to see, but there was nothing there but himself. This is very far from being our own conclusion; but we submit that it is the only one to which any attempt to synthesize the endless variety of experience claimed by visionaries of all kinds and times can logically lead. What we think can be conclusively shown by a patient investigation of the evidence is that Christian mystics have common characteristics quite apart from the doctrines

they are bound to hold in common, which are peculiar to themselves, and which afford firm ground for accepting their experiences as genuine.

It may, however, be contended that in the Absolute the disharmonies of the phenomenal world are adjusted; that it is the fragmentary character of error that makes it erroneous, and that consequently in the Absolute error is seen in relation to the whole, and therefore as a mode of truth. But if Christian doctrines are seen in the Absolute to be in themselves errors, however adjustable, then certainly they are not seen in the light in which Christian mystics professed to see them. The Christian mystics were convinced that in their peculiar experiences they had a perfect assurance of the truth of the doctrines they believed, and if we are asked to suppose that those experiences really presented the doctrines in any other light, we are merely thrown back upon our question as to what the mystics really did see. If, on the other hand, the doctrines were perceived as simply true, then the mystical vision was precisely what the mystics declared it to be, and there is no room

in it for the Absolute. Otherwise we must imagine that the Absolute can alter his aspect to suit the preconceptions of those who contemplate him—in which case he is not the Absolute but the Relative, and so passes out of even imaginary existence. To those who, like Mr. Schiller,[1] are convinced for independent reasons that the Absolute has no real existence, this interpretation of mysticism can only appear as a reversion, on a colossal scale, to the primitive confusion of mind.

The second difficulty is rather moral than logical. On this Absolutist theory it is not easy to see how the mystics' expenditure of time and energy is to be justified —much less how they can be entitled, as the Absolutists hold them to be, to our respect and admiration.

The Christian mystics believed that they contemplated the triune God who condescended to enter into the closest personal communication with them ; and that such contemplation of God was the true end of man's existence. In these transcendental experiences they held that

[1] F. Schiller, *Humanism.*

they tasted in some degree the joys reserved in full for a future beyond the grave; and it was this belief that in their view justified the devotion of their lives to the main purpose of contemplation, and explained the exalted happiness they derived from it. But if they were mistaken in this belief it is not so easy to justify their proceedings. To anticipate in this life by supernatural divine aid the occupation and delight of the next life can, from the Christian point of view, be nothing but right and admirable. But it is not held by anyone to be certain that the contemplation of the Absolute is the one true and sufficient end of man, either in this life or in the next; nor is the Absolutist at all sure that there is any personal future life to serve as the pattern or ideal for the present one. The theory we are considering, therefore, leaves it at least open to doubt whether the mystic acts rightly in neglecting the social duties and interests of a normal human being for the sake of pursuing his favourite occupation. The pantheistic theory of mysticism may thus be no less retrogressive morally than it is logically, from the point of view of its supporters

themselves. The natural contemplation, or emotional and symbolical outlook on life which has already been mentioned, holds a position quite distinct from this psychophysical transcendentalism. The former is not, indeed, true mysticism ; it deals with the transcendental not as actualised, but as inferred from the phenomenal ; it depends not on any special enlightenment by supernatural aid, but on the natural powers of soul and body, assisted or not, according to circumstances, by the ordinary operations of grace. But so far as it goes, it is a genuine thing, and the guiding principle of much that is gracious and noble in practical life. But the theory which would reduce all forms of transcendentalism to a common denominator and so deal with them *en bloc*, cannot, as we have seen, stand upright by itself, and falls to pieces by its own weight.

It only remains to point out that progress from a confused and imaginative view of the cosmos to an orderly and scientific one has been marked, in its various stages, by a series of struggles of a more or less violent character. The Arician priest "who slew the slayer and

shall himself be slain" is typical of every successive phase of thought which has prevailed for its appointed time among civilised or uncivilised communities. Prejudice dies hard, and has the support of great names and venerable traditions. Moreover, there is in the confused outlook of the primitive mind an element of truth which endears it to many. The world is not the exclusive possession of the scientist, the philosopher or even the mystic, but for all alike and together.[1] All science and all philosophy must deal with things not as they really are, but as dissociated from their place in nature for the purpose of separate investigation; and so to abstract is necessarily to some extent to falsify. Neither force nor matter nor number really exists in the shape in which it has to be dealt with by the chemist, the mechanist or the mathematician: nature combines, the intelligence of man distinguishes: neither point of view can afford to forget or neglect the other. It is no wonder, then, that the distinguishing process should at first sight seem to be a ruthless mutilation of the truth, that men's

[1] See Münsterberg, *Psychology and Life*.

natural impulses should be constantly forcing them back upon the old and easy ways, or that the pioneers of knowledge should be treated as traitors and deceivers. Moreover, it is by no means always that the newest ideas are the true ones; error as well as truth has its martyrs. The Christian revelation has never ceased to be clear in itself, nor has its divinely appointed guardian ever failed to hold it before the world in all its purity and authority; but again and again both its friends and foes have failed to distinguish between revelation itself and their own crude deductions from it, just as their remote ancestors failed to distinguish the facts of their surroundings from the imaginary causes to which those facts were referred. Mysticism, as the personal revelation of God to the individual soul, and as a special, and in some respects the highest manifestation of divine grace, has always held a place in the faith and life of the Church; but it has often been confused with the imaginations of non-Christian philosophies, with fanatical excitement, and with mere superstition.

Christian mysticism has not yet got wholly

free from its entanglement with alien ideas. Perhaps it never will; for human progress is subject to frequent reactions, and the primitive confusion seems perpetually to reappear in ever changing forms. Perhaps, too, it is as well that the "inner way," since it never can be an easy one, should not be quite obvious. One can hardly desire or even imagine that the pursuit of mystical knowledge should ever become widely popular. It came near to being so, for a short time and within a narrow circle, at the court of Louis XIV., with consequences that cannot be thought satisfactory. But those who accept the Christian revelation in its completeness need find no difficulty in recognising mysticism as at once the highest achievement of the human soul, and a testimony to the reality of the divine assistance on which that achievement depends.

MYSTICISM: ITS TRUE NATURE AND VALUE

CHAPTER I

TWO IDEAS OF MYSTICISM

Mysticism, in the wide and somewhat loose sense in which the term is commonly used, may be considered as the final outcome of a congenital desire for knowledge which appears in all animate creatures. In children and savages, as also in the lower animals, it takes the rudimentary form of sensitive curiosity; in more fully developed rational natures it becomes the desire to understand the inner nature of things, and finally extends itself to that obscure region, dimly recognised by all men, which lies beyond the sphere of things, and of the senses by which things are perceived. But knowledge is of two kinds—

abstract and concrete, or experimental and theoretical. We know for certain in one way that there are coins in the Bank of England, but we know that there are similar coins in our own pockets in quite another way: in the one we have the direct evidence of our senses, and in the other the senses indeed have their necessary part, but not by way of direct contact with the object of our knowledge. It is scarcely necessary to remark that these two kinds of knowledge go hand in hand: the theoretical in the last resort depends on the experimental; and certain as we may be of the correctness of our theoretical knowledge, we are seldom content without putting it in practice, when it is in our power to do so, and thus proving it by experiment. There is, however, a point at which the experimental test ceases to be possible, and that point is fixed by the limits of our senses: we cannot know anything experimentally which is not sensible, or capable of being embodied in sensible things, as a mechanical or chemical principle is embodied in the substances with which experiments are made. But our senses

take us only a very short distance into the nature of things—what things are "in themselves"—on what principle they are what they are—what is the inward nature of the perpetual changes they undergo; on such questions as these we can theorise freely, and can no doubt reach some conclusions which we are able to regard as absolutely certain. But we must be content with theoretical certainty at most, since experiment in these matters is out of our power. But theory itself—founded as it necessarily is on experimental knowledge—must also have a limit, which it reaches when it has exhausted the implications of sense experience—when it has, so to speak, used up the raw material of thought supplied by sensation. We can make no theory about a thing we have never seen or with which we have never been brought into contact by any of the organs of sense. Such a thing is merely x; we must know what x stands for, before we can say anything at all about it. Our imagination may make it stand for anything we please, but what we make it represent can only be some sense impression that we

recall from the past, or some idea that we have at some time abstracted from our sense knowledge.

Now we obviously reach the limit of theoretical knowledge when we come to the end (which from another point of view is the beginning) of everything. Here we are indeed far beyond the bounds of sense: but we can go no farther. There may be a great deal beyond the end, or before the beginning, of what we understand by everything; but we can find out nothing about it — for we have no means of doing so. We cannot, properly speaking, even imagine anything about it; for imagination can only repeat for us what we already know; and that can have no place beyond the beginning of all knowable things. When we see a stream of water, we can be quite certain that it has a source, and we may be able to perceive indications of the source's nature and immediate surroundings: but the stream can tell us nothing of what lies beyond its source—of the geography of the country, the character of the inhabitants, their political organisation and the like. All these

are beyond the beginning of the stream; we can find out what they are only by going there and seeing for ourselves, or by getting some one who has been there to tell us about them.

Now the limit of our theoretical knowledge in this world is reached when we attain to the concept of a First Cause, or the necessary being which produces, underlies and upholds the contingent and changeable universe; and that cause and necessary being, needless to say, is God. We have an absolute theoretical certainty of the existence of God, depending ultimately on facts of experience; and we have, or may have, many practical evidences of His power, wisdom and goodness. Moreover, He has by various means told us things about Himself which we could not otherwise have known. But direct experimental knowledge of Him we have and can have none, in the ordinary course of things. We cannot see Him, or touch Him, or hear Him. Yet the more certain men are of His existence, the more conscious they are of His love and goodness, and the more deeply their minds are penetrated by the idea of His perfection,

the more they inevitably long for some such experimental knowledge of Him as, within our earthly experience, the senses alone can obtain for us. But this, from the nature of the case, is impossible; God is no more to be directly apprehended by our senses than an idea, a thought or an emotion.

Is there then no third way by which we may not only know but feel the presence of God—by which all that He is to us may become not merely theoretical certainty, but a fact of direct experience? Is there, that is to say, any means by which, though we cannot bring Him down to the world of sense, we may ourselves, in virtue of our partially spiritual nature, ascend to the spiritual world and there behold Him?

It is the desire and the search for such a means of approach to God that has produced Mysticism or "Mystical Theology," which in its general aspect is the experience, real or supposed, of actual quasi-physical contact with God—an experience undoubtedly known in reality by many, though by many more it has beyond question been merely imagined.

"Speculative" or Dogmatic Theology is

like the theory of optics, which tells us what the eye is, and how it sees; mystical theology is the sight itself, with all that it involves of exercise and training. Speculative theology is a science; mystical theology is an art.

There are two points of view from which this art may be regarded, the natural and the supernatural. They do not by any means necessarily exclude one another; each, indeed, in point of fact, implies the other. But neglect of the supernatural side of mysticism has led to an altogether mistaken notion of what mysticism has always, until very recently, been held to mean; and it must be admitted that forgetfulness of the natural side, consisting of the limitations, necessities and obligations of humanity, has too often been the cause of degenerate and extravagant superstition, with its many attendant evils.

Viewed simply on its natural side, mysticism appears as an attempt, more or less successful, to pass through or overleap the barrier of material things, and so to enter the presence from the sight of which we are

ordinarily excluded by our subjection to the senses. There are two ways in which this attempt may be and has been made. One is by an endeavour to pass beyond the finite and sensible world by the concentration upon one point of those mental or spiritual forces which in every individual man appear to belong more to the world of permanent reality than to that of transient appearance in which our bodily life is spent. The mind resolutely casts out all figures and ideas of sensible things; it empties itself, by a powerful effort, of all its acquired furniture, and strives in its own original nakedness to behold the naked reality that exists behind the many-coloured vesture of sense. Plotinus, Proclus and their disciples, travelling by this difficult road, found, or seemed to find, the springs of being in the abstract and absolute unity which lies behind the ever-expanding variety of the created world. But whether in that remote and desolate region to which they penetrated they found anything which they had not brought with them from the world of light, colour and warmth which they

sought to abandon, may be considered doubtful. That they did not is at any rate the view of those whose object is the same, but who adopt a method the reverse of theirs. That method, by some considered the only true one, is to look for mystical knowledge not beyond, but in the material, intellectual and emotional life in which our lot is cast. It regards this world as but a small fragment of a much larger whole, and as made up of many elements, all of which are not discoverable, so at least as to be clearly distinguished by either our bodily or our intellectual faculties. But every part of it is, in this view, connected with and symbolic of something infinitely greater than itself. It embodies and illustrates the operation of vast cosmic laws; it gives evidence of a divine benevolence which reaches further than our utmost vision can follow; it is lit by a ray from the sun of perfect beauty that lies below the horizon of earthly existence. Thus "a man's reach must exceed his grasp" as he goes through life; his mind constructs from the "broken arc" of natural experience

the "perfect round" of heavenly beatitude; in the discords of earth his ear catches echoes of celestial harmonies, and the darkest places of this world are invested with "clouds of glory" for those who thus "see into the life of things."

Thus mysticism has been called "the attempt to realise the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature, or, more generally, the attempt to realise in thought and feeling the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal."[1]

No one can dispute the universal right of defining terms according to taste and fancy; and those who define or describe mysticism in this way have a perfect right to do so. But if this is mysticism, then surely we ought to have another name for the other method — the "tremendous journey towards the mysterious Isles of Fire, the Icelands of abstraction and of love" undertaken by Philo, Plotinus or Proclus.[2]

[1] W. R. Inge, "Christian Mysticism," *Bampton Lectures*, Lect. I.

[2] Maeterlinck, *Ruysbroeck and the Mystics*. Introd.

There would seem to be little in common between the suggestive and symbolic aspect of things in which the world appears as the true manifestation of God, and that in which the same world is felt to be the one great obstacle which conceals the eternal reality from the sight.

But whichever method may be considered the right one, mysticism, considered as a purely natural phenomenon (*i.e.*, as consisting in a peculiar exercise of the natural powers), is necessarily limited to the interaction of human reason and emotion and those natural objects with which reason and emotion are concerned; and in which suggestions of something supernatural may be more or less clearly perceived. Mysticism so understood is merely a certain attitude of the mind towards its surroundings; and what it perceives is proved, it is thought, to be thereby really there. Its outlook may be partial, and its ideas consequently one-sided, and the expression of them may need correction. But it is all true, whether as fact or as symbol—which may, though itself literally untrue, yet be

more true than the literal truth. "The true is, for us, the good."[1] All that can be discerned in the nature which half conceals and half reveals the Deity, so far as it is beautiful, attractive and ennobling, is in some sense true, and in some degree a vision of God. Such visions, therefore, as seen by different minds and by whatever method, need only to be compared, correlated and mutually adjusted, in order to form all that from this point of view can be rightly called a body of Mystical Theology.

The second view which may be taken of the subject as a whole is that of Dionysius, and of the long succession of mystics who have consciously or unconsciously adopted the principles laid down in his *Mystical Theology*. Its basis is a profound conviction of the uniqueness and incommunicability of the Divine nature. However exalted creatures may be in nature, and however perfect in relation to their place and function, there is a chasm between them and their Divine Creator which cannot be

[1] Inge, *op. cit.*, Lect. VII.

closed or bridged even in thought. However sharply any one form of existence may be distinguished from all others, this distinction cannot even approach the fundamental character of the distinction between all creatures on the one side and their Creator on the other. There cannot even, properly speaking, be so near a *rapprochement* of the two as to make a real distinction possible—God can be related, in His essence, to creatures only by a fiction of the mind: they are to His absolute independence and self-sufficiency as nothing. But on the other hand, God is not separated from Creation by time or space—by which His being is, indeed, not affected in any way.

All creatures are in a state of immediate dependence upon Him, and it is only in virtue of this dependence that they exist. In a certain sense, therefore, God is immediately present among and in creatures: they are the continual offspring of His power and wisdom; and where these are at work, there God in His uncreated essence must also be. Consequently, God is in a true sense immanent in creation; He is

not indeed mixed with it, and it is and must be the one thing that in His uncreated being He cannot resemble; yet all creation has the distant likeness to Him which mere being imparts; and in all its parts reflects, however dimly, His wisdom and beauty. Therefore *that* God is may be clearly known from the "visible things" of creation. But *what* God is in Himself, no man can know, unless God Himself reveals it to him. To see the reflection of Divine beauty is one thing: to see God is another. For all man's natural knowledge comes from creatures, and by way of sensation: and God is the one being that is not a creature, and of whom sensation can directly tell us nothing.

This being so, the only direct, immediate or experimental knowledge of God that man can attain to must be supernaturally bestowed upon him. Naturally, man is enclosed within the iron walls of sense and sensible things, through which no sound or ray of light can penetrate; their solid metal vibrates, so to speak, and the warmth from without is felt in the air they enclose. But all is silence and darkness,

unless the solid barrier is removed by some power greater than man's. To supernatural mysticism it seems that such power is from time to time exerted for man's benefit; the walls of his prison are parted, for a moment at least, and he sees something of what lies outside. And if any true vision of God has ever been obtained by those who have sought it through the exertion of their natural powers — whether negatively, as the Neoplatonist ascetics, or positively, as the nature mystics and symbolists—it has come directly, not from the exertion of those powers, but from His spontaneous bounty alone.

Such is the theory of mysticism which obtains in the Catholic Church. It does not dispute the genuineness or the attractiveness of the symbolical view of life, nor does it deny the necessity of personal effort as a condition (though not the cause) of the supernatural vision; but it holds that merely natural contemplation is based on association and feeling, and is incapable of leading the soul beyond the confines of the material world. Natural symbolism will make known much of God's

action and of His nature; but it cannot bring man face to face with Him. The supernatural conception of mysticism, moreover, admits fully the existence of a constant need and desire in mankind for God, even far beyond the Christian pale; it is also ready to admit, where sufficient evidence can be shown, that this desire has in any given case received some degree of satisfaction in the only way in which such satisfaction is possible. God's condescension is not to be confined within any narrower limits than those He has Himself imposed; and there is nothing contrary to possibility in the Alexandrian opinion that such a mystical knowledge of God had been attained by some Neoplatonists as many Christians had failed to reach. The one point insisted on is that such knowledge is and must be essentially supernatural; that is, that it cannot be obtained by means of any created thing, or by any effort of the human powers, since the thing known is itself, in Dionysius' words, ἐπεκείνα πάντων—beyond all that man can of himself see or know.

The first thing that strikes one about these two general views of the subject would seem

to be their quite obvious incompatibility. More than one praiseworthy attempt has been made to treat them together, as two varieties of the same thing. But the only way in which this can possibly be done is by taking one as the genuine theory of Mysticism, and the other as spurious.

Mysticism might conceivably be either natural or supernatural; it cannot possibly be both. If God can be seen or known in and by nature, then the supernatural contemplation of Him as essentially apart from and above all creatures can only be a delusion. For the two methods are directly opposed to one another; and two opposite processes cannot possibly have an identical result. If, on the other hand, the Dionysian method of abstraction can, by the aid of Divine Grace, enable man to transcend created nature and to behold the absolute uncreated existence, then the method which looks for an intuition of God in nature may indeed have a high value as poetry or romance, or as a way of appreciating the evidence for God's existence; but it cannot, in that case, be mysticism. However

strongly based on experience, or however deeply emotional in its mental reactions, it is in the last analysis merely a process of inference; and any appearance it may give rise to of intuitive knowledge must be capable of analysis into the component parts of an inductive syllogism. "The mystic," it has been said, "is the only thorough-going empiricist;"[1] and indeed, in regard to his transcendental intuitions he can be nothing else. In the vision claimed by supernatural mysticism — and there alone—the "that" and the "what" are identical; essence and existence are one in God, and experimental knowledge of His existence must necessarily preclude all discursive reasoning as to His essence. Hence both the certitude of mystics as to the reality of their knowledge, and their total incapacity to explain it. Thorough empiricism is really possible only at the two ends of the scale of human experience—in mystical contemplation and in sensation. In sensation, as in mysticism, empiricism is the only possible attitude; sensations in themselves, and as

[1] Royce, *The World and the Individual*, vol. i. ch. i.

they appear grouped in consciousness, are complete and immediate; they cannot be explained, idealised or analysed. But the moment sensations become the subject of thought, pure empiricism is no longer possible; sense-experience must depend for its continuity upon some kind of ideal constructions; and the poetry and romance of life and nature, and even the "Ascensio mentis in Deum per scalam rerum creatarum," are no more than modes of the mind's perpetual wrestling with its environment. It is only when "the wheel has come full circle" in the intuition of mysticism that the unquestionable immediacy, finality and certainty of sensation are brought back in the higher sphere of the intelligence.

Such, at least, is the contention on behalf of supernatural mysticism; and the only real alternative to it is complete surrender of all that mysticism has been held to connote. For a confused consciousness of the divine or the supernatural, as symbolised or suggested by certain fragmentary aspects of nature, or art, or social existence, is at bottom a perfectly different thing from the direct vision of

and intercourse with a divine person. "I talk not with thy dreams," supernatural mysticism replies to the imaginative outpourings of the nature mystic, the philanthropist or the lover.[1]

Beautiful or pathetic or true as those dreams may be, they have no other origin than that of dreams which are none of those things; and if supernatural mysticism is only another kind of dream — if its origin can be traced to the same turbid stream of mingled experience and thought—well then, there is no such thing as true mysticism; we must revert to the opinion of those to whom mysticism was

[1] St John of the Cross brings the two methods into sharp contrast. "While created things furnish to the soul traces of the Beloved, and exhibit the impress of His beauty and magnificence, the love of the soul increases, and consequently the pain of His absence; for the greater the soul's knowledge of God, the greater is the desire to see Him, and its pain when it cannot; and while there is no remedy for this pain except in the presence of the Beloved, the soul, distrustful of every other remedy, prays for the fruition of His presence." It says, in effect: "Entertain me no more with any knowledge of Thee or with Thy communications or impressions of Thy grandeur, for these do but increase my longing and the pain of Thy absence; for Thy presence alone can satisfy my will and desire." The will cannot be satisfied with anything less than the vision of God, and therefore the soul prays that He may be pleased to give Himself to it perfectly in truth, in the consolation of love." —*Spiritual Canticle*, Explanation of Stanza VI.

only a name for an ignoble kind of self-delusion, and relegate both name and thing to the secular lumber-room which has already received such outworn mental furniture as astrology, alchemy and necromancy. Romanticism will doubtless always hold a certain place in human thought and feeling; for whatever new aspects nature and life may have in store, there can hardly fail at any time to be numbers of men and women whose sensibility is more readily awakened by the contact of their surroundings than by interior reflection. But mysticism is, as we have seen, either supernatural or nothing. Our enquiry must therefore be directed to the conditions which supernatural mysticism claims for itself, with the view of determining whether or not its pretensions have a sufficient basis in observable facts to entitle to credence those transcendental experiences for which we can have no evidence beyond the bare word of the mystic himself. We shall have therefore to consider whether and how far the Dionysian principles are identical with those which are discernible in the

ordinary course of nature; whether mystical states, as described by those who have experienced them, are compatible with the nature and normal action of the human faculties; and whether those states — if we find them to rest on a solid theory, and to be in harmony with the verified results of psychological investigation—may or may not be adequately accounted for by merely natural agency.

As to these three questions, which will be discussed in some detail further on, it will be sufficient to note here first, that ordinary cognition and reflection require as their starting-point some contact with external matter (what such contact, externality and matter may be in themselves we need not, for our present purpose, enquire) by means of which the mind may form ideas, to be subsequently dealt with by way of reflection. Consequently, ideas or thoughts which are not related in this manner and degree to external material things are simply inconceivable in the natural order: and if it is granted that the mind may by any means so

abstract itself from the external world that it has no image of any external thing before it, either directly as a "phantasm," or indirectly as an abstract idea formed on a basis of sense-experience, then, naturally speaking, it has nothing before it but an absolute blank. But this is precisely the condition in which the mind is conceived by supernatural mystics to be during the time — generally a very brief one—of contemplation. So far as the natural world and all images derived from it are concerned, there is nothing but a blank. But the void is filled by the divine presence, and by supernatural agency. We are not, however, led to suppose by anything mystical writers tell us that the state of mere negative abstraction ever actually exists.[1] One may well doubt whether it is possible that it should;

[1] *Cf.* Schopenhauer. "If something is none of all the things we know, it is certainly for us, speaking generally, nothing. But it does not follow from this that it is absolutely nothing, that from every possible point of view and in every possible sense it must be nothing, but only that we are limited to a completely negative knowledge of it, which may very well lie in the limitations of our point of view. Now it is just here that mysticism proceeds positively, and therefore it is just from this point that nothing but mysticism remains."—*World as Will and Idea*, iv. 48.

and certainly the mystic does not suppose himself to create a mental blank, which, after being so created, is supernaturally filled. On the contrary, the fundamental notion of the mystical state is "Rapture"—the mind does not extricate itself, but is taken out of its normal relations with the external world by that very presence and influence which supplies their place. The mystical knowledge of God is, in regard to all natural knowledge and light, merely "Ignorance" and "Darkness"; and this is the only condition under which such knowledge could conceivably be imparted. The soul, as it were, looks over the extreme edge of the phenomenal world, and has no use whatever for anything belonging to that world: if it had any, it could not really be at the edge, but would be the subject of a delusion. Mystical knowledge, therefore, in no way contradicts the principles which appear necessarily to govern the ordinary cognition of human beings; it does not even imply emancipation from them, it merely transfers them to another sphere.

But a word must be said as to the nature

of this sphere. It is, of course, what is commonly called the supernatural: and the supernatural sphere is conceived unquestionably by the mystic as distinct from and excluding the natural. The supernatural begins where the natural ends. If this is denied, then of course there is an end of supernatural mysticism as a genuine thing — and, by consequence, as we have seen, of anything whatever that can be clearly connoted by the term. Mr Inge, indeed, in his otherwise admirable *Bampton Lectures*, strongly opposes this theory; on what grounds it is not easy to see. He, with other modern upholders of mysticism, in the sense in which it is understood by them, regards the phenomenal world interpreted by reason as a true manifestation of the divine ideas and nature; it is the imperfection of human reason, caused by sin and ignorance, that prevents men in general from "seeing the world as God sees it"—as, in fact, it really exists in the mind of God—and as being spiritual in its nature, by reason of its creation by His thought and will. We may pass over the latent Spinozism of

these and similar phrases, which, taken literally, would seem to identify spirit and matter, the created universe and God. The point where this theory manifestly falls short of true mysticism is that it takes something created, no matter what, for its final object. Supernatural mysticism, as we have said already, has no objection to offer to the notion that something of the nature and will of God can be discerned in all created things, that He is truly reflected in them, and that this reflection can be distinguished with increasing clearness as we draw near to the perfect human state.[1] All this is as true from the point of view of supernatural myticism as from that of its rival.

But "realisation in thought and feeling" is not experimental knowledge of God: thought and feeling may perceive *quod est — that* He exists, in the plenitude of the divine attributes; but they cannot see *quid est— what* He is in His own absolute being. At most, natural mysticism is a true vision of creation: what supernatural mysticism claims

[1] Cf. *Summa*, 1. 2. 1, 1. and 2. c.: also 1. 12. 6. c.

to be is the vision of the Creator. The two views, so far from being mutually exclusive, are mutually complementary: the error lies in denial of the possibility of the supernatural knowledge, not in assertion of the natural. Moreover, there is really no difference of principle or method between the two; the difference is in the object at which each, in point of fact, aims. For there is, after all, only one way in which the being of God can be inferred from visible things; and that is the *Via Remotionis* — the negative road which "nature mystics" depreciate as at most insufficient for its assumed purpose. Whatever is known by the senses can, indeed, or perhaps even must suggest a train of reasoning, conscious or subconscious, which ends in the concept of a spiritual and personal reality underlying the manifestations of nature. But this can only be attained by abstracting from the impressions which furnish the suggestion; the concept itself is formed by the reason, though it is more or less confused, and reaches up to a sphere which neither reason nor sense can enter. But it is not intuitive or empirical;

it is an idea evolved or constructed by a rational process which in no way differs from other rational processes: it is not an illumination from without. In other words, it is no more mystical than our thoughts about any matter of ordinary business or domestic economy, from which it differs only in its subject-matter.

Take, for example, the elevated emotions produced by the contemplation of the magnificent panorama of sunset. What we see is a shifting arrangement of colours—blue, red, purple and green. What we extract from it is a particular sense of beauty, and thence, by association of ideas, a confused concept of all the beautiful things in the world.

From this it is easy and natural to pass to thoughts of the mysteriously elusive principle of beauty, of the source of that principle and of the creation in which it is embodied, and, lastly, of the nature of that source, and of the absolute moral and spiritual beauty to which its works testify. But this train of thought is in reality a train of negations. We practically consider that beauty is not essentially of any colour—it is a principle not embodied in any

one form—it cannot be self-caused, but must have a source outside itself. This source indeed is God; but He is not beautiful in the same way as the sunset—He is not blue or red or green, nor is His beauty dependent on any material constitution. But He is that incomprehensible reality which gives beauty to the colours of the sunset, and to all the good and beautiful things, of whatever kind, in the universe: He is not any one of those things, nor yet all of them together, but He contains in Himself the principle of them all: they are all, as scholastics say, *eminenter* in Him.

When we have reached this point we have got rid of everything that our senses tell us of, and have erected for our contemplation a purely abstract conception, upon which the lights of sunset still seem to play, and which therefore retains something of their charm so long as the impression lasts, but in itself is stripped of every image that in this world we know as beautiful.[1] The solemn and pious or romantic feelings which a brilliant sunset

[1] *Cf.* Illingworth, *Divine Immanence*, ch. iii.

calls into being are based on an inference of a nature in no respect differing from that of Paley's inference of a watchmaker from a watch. Natural mysticism is concerned with ideas and theories, not with actual experiences. Its method is identical with the *Via Remotionis* of speculative theology, of which the mystical or practical parallel is the withdrawal of the intelligence, under divine guidance, from the contemplation of any sensible image whatever, and its illumination, not by an abstract idea, but by an actual presence.

Secondly, it should be observed that the mode in which this illumination takes place is not to be considered abnormal in itself, though it obviously depends on abnormal conditions.

The mental faculties act, or may act, in the ordinary way. The difference between the mystical and the merely natural states lies, as we have seen, in the object of the faculties, not, so far as can be judged, in their mode of action. The reason and intelligence under ordinary circumstances work upon a basis of sensation; the reactions of the mind depend ultimately upon the cumulative reactions of

the body; or, in other words, the mind can only act upon material furnished originally by the senses. In mystical states this material groundwork is, of course, absent, and in that fact lies their supernatural character. The place of the material is supplied by the presence and action of supernatural divine agency, but the mental and bodily reactions certainly need not differ essentially in character from those ordinarily set up by sensation. It would be perfectly true to say that the mind, or soul, can only act in one way; and that consequently any theory which requires that it should act in a different way is thereby made absolutely incredible. For such a theory would imply a self-contradiction, which is the one absolutely incredible thing. It would be like saying that one sees a sound, or hears an odour. If the soul were to act as a mere passive receptacle, and yet be conscious of that which it received, it would be an unmeaning contradiction of itself, such as could not possibly exist or be conceived. Consciousness is active; the mind can no more be a mere unresponsive receptacle than the body can experience sensation with-

out being itself alive and active. The fact of consciousness necessarily implies the normal mental activity of the subject, with all the physical concomitants necessary to it. But the connection between consciousness and sensation—the mode in which one is transferred to the other—is still very obscure and the subject of many divergent theories: at any rate, there appears to be nothing impossible, or even irregular, in the idea that consciousness and intelligence may follow their normal course on a basis of supersensible ideas, presented to them, not by means of sense, but by supernatural and divine interposition.

If we can be conscious of the presence of a spiritual being by means of an inference from the sensations excited by his bodily presence, as we are conscious in our friend's presence of a spiritual personality inferred from sensible evidences, then it is at least quite conceivable that God may cause Himself to be apprehended as immediately present merely by stimulating the consciousness in the same way in which it is ordinarily stimulated by the idea (the *species intelligibilis*) abstracted from sense-impressions,

which in this case may be given ready made instead of being constructed by the intellect.[1] There is equally, of course, no *a priori* impossibility in such communications being made by agencies other than divine, and it is difficult to see why any one who believes in the existence of created spiritual personalities other than human should regard them as being incapable under any circumstances of exercising direct influence upon mankind. All stories of angelic visitations, or of diabolical possession, may not be true; and writers such as Görres, Schram and Ribet may be over-systematic and over-minute in dealing with this subject. But there can be no *a priori* reason for dismissing it as merely superstitious.

Of the visions and locutions, "imaginary" or "intellectual," by means of which mystical communications have not infrequently been conveyed, there is no need to speak here.

[1] *Cf.* Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire*, p. 33: "Que la matière puisse etre perçu sans le concours d'un systeme nerveux, sans organes de sens, cela n'est pas théoriquement inconcevable." If this abstract direct perceptibility of matter by the soul be conceded, it would seem to follow *a fortiori* that the soul may perceive that which is immaterial, like the soul itself, without any intermediate sensation.

They are not essential to mystical experience, and are held by mystical authorities to be of quite secondary importance at best. It is plain that the mode of communication we have been considering is quite capable of strongly affecting the imagination, and may do so either by creating fresh imaginary figures, or by recalling past impressions derived from such things as pictures and statues. Some of the visions of St Teresa, Julian of Norwich, Anne Catherine Emmerich and many others are frankly admitted to be of the latter kind.

Thirdly, the phenomena of mystical contemplation cannot be considered capable of explanation by any theory which excludes the supernatural. Two such theories have been suggested. The apparently infused supernatural object of contemplation has been thought to be merely an image drawn by the normal process of the understanding from past conscious experience; the supposed divine illumination is held to be, in fact, the result of self-delusion. Again, there are certain resemblances between mystical states and

those induced by diseased conditions or drugs, which have suggested the theory that mystical states are really pathological, and are only abnormal in that sense. But in spite of such obvious resemblances as might naturally be expected to occur in all abnormal conditions of individual organisms of the same species, there are marked differences which absolutely preclude the possibility of explaining mystical conditions in any of these ways.

First, there is in these states (apart from the occurrence of visions) no figure or image whatever, such as necessarily occurs in any natural process of reasoning or imagination. Recorded mystical experiences, various as they are in type, uniformly fail to connect themselves with any preceding thought or experience of a natural kind. The assertion, frequently made, that they must be so connected is nothing but an arbitrary assumption; the evidence is all the other way. Then the visions or hallucinations proceeding from a drugged or otherwise pathological condition are characterised, as it seems, invariably, by monstrous or grotesque visual appearances, or

by strange physical sensations which, though in some persons they have apparently exercised some power of spiritual suggestion, belong distinctly to the order of natural dreams: their physical origin is manifest, though its precise locality is, naturally, not always ascertainable.[1] Moreover, mystics have always been remarkable for sanity and placidity even when invalids; the neurotic temperament which belongs to pathological states of consciousness is conspicuously rare, even if not entirely absent among them. Such a temperament can hardly be thought compatible with the "straightforwardness, simplicity and dauntless courage" of St Teresa, or the "tremendous moral force" of St John of the Cross,[2] or with the energetic activity and the tender human sympathy of St Catherine of Siena. Moreover, it is worth noticing in this connection that for the practical purposes of canonisation and beatification a clearly recognisable distinction is and has always been perceived by ecclesiastical authority—depending more

[1] *See* the instances given by James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (*Mysticism*).

[2] Inge, "Christian Mysticism," Lect. VI.

on common sense than on any psychological theory—between experiences which may be classed as pathological, and those which must be considered supernatural.[1]

On the whole, therefore, it seems hardly too much to say that none of the proposed explanations would have any weight whatever, apart from the reluctance to admit the existence and possibility of supernatural experience which, by a natural swing of the pendulum, has superseded in our day the former too great readiness to seek a supernatural cause for any uncommon event.

But, it may be said, what does all this matter? The subject can be of direct interest only to those who have, or believe themselves to have, mystical experience of the supernatural kind: and they are very few in number even if any of them are still extant. Moreover, mysticism, in that sense, is not part of the Christian religion; it is quite possible to be not merely a good Christian, but even a saint, without so much as knowing anything about the matter. Why not leave it to those, if

[1] *See* Benedict XIV. De Canonis.

any there are, who are the subjects of these abnormal experiences, and whose conviction as to the nature of them is already unshakeable, and to those experts who from time to time may have to form a judgment about them? For the ordinary run of people there can be no use in considering a subject which in no way concerns either their faith or their duty. Now it is quite true that comparatively few are called to supernatural contemplation; it is equally true that neither the faith nor the practical duty of Christians in general can in any way depend on "private revelations" or on mystical knowledge of any kind. Nevertheless, the subject has a distinct interest and importance of its own for all who desire to form a clear and correct judgment as to the true attitude of the Catholic Church in regard to human life in general, or who wish to appreciate fully the whole range of the evidence to be adduced in favour of her claims. For on the one hand, since mysticism is a constant feature — though not equally prominent at all times—of Christian life, it cannot rightly be neglected by any who

wish to form a just estimate of the character of that life as a whole; and on the other hand, mysticism has a distinct evidential value whether considered in itself or in its relation to other factors of the Catholic system, which is by no means confined to those who have experimental knowledge of it. I will try to establish these two points.

1. Christianity, as fully represented and embodied in the Catholic Church, appeals to human nature as a whole, not to any part or aspect of it. That is to say, the Church deals with human nature in its completeness, apart from all individual, national or racial characteristics. It is therefore necessary that every factor in that nature should find itself recognised, and a place provided for it, with appropriate guidance and discipline, in due relation and harmony with all else that goes to make up humanity, in the system of the Church. In this sense the Church has affinities with all forms of religion and philosophy; for in each of them some modicum at least of truth is to be found, which, if the Church is truly what she represents herself

to be, will be acknowledged and co-ordinated with other truths in the complete body of her doctrine. Error, even in its extremest forms, is not "a lie that is all a lie"—it is truth torn from its natural place in the scheme of things, and so seen in false perspective; truth is only true when seen in its due relation to the whole. Men are misled, not by that which does not exist—a thing we may well believe to be impossible—but by following that which is true without regard to its complementary truths. This fact is nowhere so evident as in the case of mysticism, which, like liberty, has given the shelter of its name to almost every conceivable aberration of moral conduct. The desire for God, pursued often by the most extravagant methods and disguised under the most unlikely pretexts, is the real motive-power of all human activity whatsoever. Mysticism, on its purely human side, is one road by which men seek for the heart's rest which all, even in spite of themselves, desire. Whether within or without the Church men will strive to see God, because they must; the methods they adopt may be

determined by varying temperaments or circumstances, but among them has always been and must always be the "inner way"—the way of abstraction and contemplation, the effort to pass beyond the many-coloured dome of life into the "white radiance" of true reality beyond it.

Now if the Church had nothing to say to this deeply rooted and constantly manifest human desire, she would surely fall far short of the place that she claims, and has held successfully from the first. Still more, if, like some, she had condemned, as merely presumptuous and delusive, the efforts of mankind to realise in some faint degree now the very life which she promises hereafter, she would have come perilously near to denying her own authority and commission. She would have said in effect to mankind, You are made for God; you are to look forward to the supernatural enjoyment of Him in Eternity, and there is no limit to the favours which He can and may bestow on you here and now. But one thing you may not have, one thing He shall not do for you—and that the one which

you most desire — you shall not have the briefest or slightest foretaste here of the blessedness that is to be yours hereafter; God Himself, though He may do miracles of all sorts but this, shall not pierce the crust of material things which hides Him from you, or show you the faintest spark of the radiance that lies beyond it — "d'efense à Dieu de faire miracles en ce lieu." But the Church has never done anything of the kind. Mystical knowledge has always been fully recognised by her as possible, and as existing—whether in the Hebrew prophets, the Apostles of Christ, or the contemplatives of successive ages since their day. Even for mystics, as such, without her pale she has had no condemnation; she has condemned their misbelief, but has kept silence about their mysticism; and in her theology and philosophy the phenomena of mysticism have been dealt with and explained in accordance with the methods which were applied to all other phases of human experience. Not only a professed mystic like Dionysius, but a Clement, an Augustine, a Thomas Aquinas, has each had his word to

say and his ray, more or less brilliant, of light to contribute to the sum total of the Church's wisdom, ever growing with the increasing experience of the human race. The aspirations of man towards immediate knowledge of God and union with Him are therefore recognised and adopted by the Church as a true part of that multifarious human energy which it is her function to direct, regulate and enlighten. Such aspirations are to find full satisfaction hereafter for those who are willing to be guided in their exercise; they are partially to be satisfied here, in a certain degree by the "natural" contemplation which is the common right of all Christians, and in a fuller measure, and after a higher and more perfect manner, in the supernatural contemplation which is the privilege of comparatively few. Thus the truth that underlies in different ways and degrees the mystical theories and ascetic practices of Neoplatonist, Gnostic or Buddhist, Parsee or Mohammedan, is cleared from its surroundings of mythological or theosophical imagination and set in its place in the harmony of truths which are made known by nature and

by revelation, and preserved in the dogmatic structure of the Church's faith.

What scholastic philosophy has done for mysticism is to make clear the distinction between its natural and supernatural parts. St Augustine, no less than Dionysius, did indeed call attention to the necessarily supernatural character of any direct contemplation of the divine nature, but it was St Thomas whose analysis of the nature of the intellectual faculties in man made clear the reason why this must be so. Man's way of knowledge is inextricably involved with his bodily organism, since body and soul are not two substances but one. Consequently, immediate knowledge of that which is purely spiritual or immaterial cannot come to him by any exercise of his natural powers, but only by a "rapture" or "ecstasy" in which he is made to transcend his own present nature, and for a moment to enjoy the beatitude habitual to those who have attained the goal of their desires in the eternal vision of God. No instance of the way in which the *magisterium* of the Church has dealt with the impulses and feelings of humanity is

clearer or more illuminating than this: or more plainly illustrates the co-ordination and mutual support of the truths of nature and grace in that comprehensive view of man's nature which is possible only to an organisation which, as being both fully human and at the same time truly divine, is able to maintain a perfect balance between the natural and the supernatural.

It is therefore plain that mystical theology is not the least precious of the Church's treasures. It resembles the way of life technically called religious in its relation to the general life of the faithful: it belongs not indeed to the *esse*, but to the *bene esse* of the Church—it is necessary not to its existence, but to its integrity. The mere existence of the religious life, in its various forms, is undoubtedly a source of joy and consolation and a moral support to countless persons who are very far from having a "vocation" themselves. In the same way, the recognition of the life of mystical contemplation is an encouragement and happiness to many who (like the present writer) know nothing of it by personal experi-

ence : and it can hardly be doubted that its value in this respect would be more widely and deeply appreciated if its nature were better understood than it is. It completes the circle of the Church's adaptation to human needs, and brings together in the unity of a divinely human institution every temperament, as well as every class, occupation and moral character ; and is in this aspect an important factor in that kind of moral evidence of the justice of the Church's claims which is supplied by the practical services she has rendered, and is daily rendering, to humanity in general.

2. The direct evidential value, as distinct from this indirect testimony of the Church's mystical theology, arises from its experimental character, as contrasted with the theoretical nature of "speculative" theology. The symmetry and completeness of the body of Catholic doctrine is admitted on all hands ; it is even said by some to be too complete and perfect to have any real bearing on a state of things so fragmentary and unsystematic as that of the world in which we have to live.

The question is, Is it really true? And to

this question the answer is often given that nobody knows, because it cannot be submitted to any practical test. The complaint is, indeed, an unjust one, even on its own grounds. For the consistency of Catholic doctrine not merely with itself (though even that is something), but with other departments of knowledge, in which fresh forms of truth are continually emerging, really constitutes a practical test of the most stringent kind, and one which has been constantly repeated under ever-varying conditions from the first. But this is not a test of the kind which leaps to the eyes; it does not impress by any external signs, or arrest the attention of the careless and uninterested. It needs to be pondered and considered in the light of a degree of knowledge which is not universally possessed before its full significance can be appreciated. But the experience of the mystic is of quite a different character; though its testimony is perhaps less weighty in reality than that of the failure of twenty centuries of discovery to shake the credibility of revelation, it is more easily recognised and appeals to a

different and less purely rational order of intelligence. Mystics are, in fact, to the religion of the multitude very much what the pioneers of natural science are to the popular interest in that subject. The mystics are the experimentalists of religion. We cannot all be Newtons or Faradays or Huxleys; but our outlook on life is wider, and our appreciation of the wonders of nature is deeper for researches, of the nature and truth of which our knowledge may be somewhat vague and imperfect. So, though few indeed may have the gift or the merits of the great mystics, what they have seen is an assurance for all of the reality of the invisible universe, and of the truth of those experiences by which all, whether mystics or not, are enabled in some degree to share with them the knowledge and the enjoyment of divine things. For this purpose it is necessary indeed that the accounts given by mystics of their experiences should be as credible, at least, as those which scientific experts give of their researches. But that this is really the case no one who will give unprejudiced considera-

tion to the question can seriously doubt. It is most unfortunate that the only two English authors who have dealt specifically with this aspect of the subject should have written under the influence of a *parti pris* which, notwithstanding the erudition and acumen displayed by them, has deprived their judgment of all value.

CHAPTER II

SUPERNATURAL MYSTICISM

MYSTICISM has often been described, but seldom defined; and the definitions have not always been satisfactory. Yet in order to have any clear understanding of what is meant by a word used in so many different senses, it is very necessary to begin with a definition of the precise idea which it originally connoted, and which underlies and forms the connecting link among its various applications. Etymologically, mystics are those who have been initiated into the mysteries or esoteric rites of Greek religion; the *μύσται, μεμυήμενοι,* or fully instructed persons who were privileged to take part in the ceremonies periodically performed in honour of a god, from participation in which the general public was excluded. Any one or anything belonging

to the celebration of these sacred rites was "Mystic" — even to the "Mystica vannus Iacchi" of Virgil; and the two prominent ideas connected with the word were consequently—first, special knowledge obtained by instruction (μυέω), and secondly, an obligation or other necessity of secrecy in regard to it (μύω).[1] The mystics are, in fact, the inner circle of the devotees of any cult; they are possessed of knowledge which partakes of the nature of revelation rather than of acquired science, and which is imparted in consideration of some special aptitude, natural or acquired, such as is not found in the general run of mankind. It is further implied that the knowledge is of a transcendental kind, such as may be supposed to be necessary for the devout worship of a divine being; this, however, though obviously part of the original meaning of the term, is not always signified in its later uses. But the one idea common to all uses is that of special knowledge confined to a *corps d'élite* of persons with a peculiar

[1] "Mysticum interpretatur absconditum," Gerson, *Myst. Theol.*, 1.

aptitude for its acquisition. Thus the early Christian Church conceived itself to hold the position of a body of mystics with regard to mankind in general: its members were the depositaries of a revelation (Arcanum) not, at least in all points, accessible to the outside world; they were initiated by the "illuminating" rite of baptism, and thereby admitted to participation in the other sacraments, or mysteries, of the Christian religion. Thus St Paul (Phil. iv. 12) speaks of himself as μεμυήμενος; and in the Greek liturgies the priest is directed to say the "secret" prayers μυστικῶς—in silence. Hence, in later times, any art or handicraft which made use of traditional methods came to be known as a "Mystery." Its secrets were imparted to the novice at or after his initiation into the guild or company by which it was carried on, and under which he had served an apprenticeship: such "arts and mysteries" are still professed, though not always practised, by the guilds which have survived to the present day.

But in the Church there has always been a circle within a circle; within the body of

the initiated a body of those who have undergone a further initiation ; among the instructed some favoured ones who have received fuller instruction.[1] And whereas initiation into the Christian community has been entrusted by divine authority to the Church itself, the further illumination of the selected is received directly from God. Hence has arisen by a natural transference the popular application of the term to any view or conception of the transcendental or the unseen, to anything "vague, vast and sentimental"; and hence again the note of condemnation or contempt which was attached in England to the idea of mysticism, as it was to its distant relation "enthusiasm," during the century ended some fifty years ago—a "mystic" during that period being considered much the same thing as a visionary or a sentimentalist. The word has since then recovered from its temporary

[1] *Cf.* Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, vol. i. p. 237. Christianity gained special weight from the fact that, in the first place, it had mysterious secrets of its own, which it sought to fathom only to adore them once again in silence ; and secondly, that it preached to the perfect in another and a deeper sense than it did to simple folk.

degradation; and though it is still used somewhat loosely, it no longer carries any burden of offensiveness. The laxity of use from which it still suffers consists in the emphasising of one part of its full connotation to the practical exclusion of the other: any knowledge or experience, real or imaginary, which is beyond the scope of ordinary sense-experience, is apt to be called mystical. But such knowledge is not mystical in the proper or strict sense, unless it is held also to be imparted, and not acquired by the independent exercise of the natural powers. It would, of course, be absurd to contend that the conventional meaning of a word, in many cases an enrichment rather than a perversion, has not at least as good a claim to acceptance as its etymological one. But where, as in this case, the conventional uses of the word have obscured the nature of the thing for which it originally stood, it is necessary to determine the sense in which the word is to be used in the discussion of the thing.

The name was first applied in the sense in which we have now defined it by Dionysius

—whoever the author known under that name may have been. The thing, however, was undoubtedly known and recognised in the Church from the beginning. The apostles were certainly mystics in the fullest sense; and the mystical tendencies of sub-apostolic times are evidenced and fairly represented by the "Shepherd" of Hermas, and the writings and authentic acts of many of the early martyrs. The self-chosen title of St Ignatius, *θεοφορὸς*, the God-bearer, implies a claim to the possession of mystical experience of the most far-reaching kind. But mysticism—or at least the temperament which seeks knowledge by means of illumination rather than discursive reasoning — belongs essentially to human nature, and appears, under one form or another, wherever thought is free.

Thus, to leave the Eastern theosophy out of account, a mystical element appears, in greater or less degree, in all Greek philosophy, if the mere negations of Pyrrhonism may be excepted. Before Socrates, Greek philosophers were seers rather than reasoners: the apophthegmatic character of their utterances affects to

be the result rather of intuition than of reasoning: and the dialectic of Plato, and even the logical precision of Aristotle, led in the end, theoretically at least, to that pure contemplation in which alone Aristotle conceived that beatitude consists. In the later Platonic schools mysticism tended more and more to replace discursive reasoning; contemplation rather than reasoned knowledge became more and more definitely the object of philosophy, and ascetic self-discipline appeared a surer way than argument to attain this end. Plotinus (whom M. Maeterlinck calls "the one analytical mystic"), and Proclus after him, present the doctrines of later Neoplatonism in a systematic form, and are free from the magical and theurgic extravagances into which it degenerated in other hands.

The two streams of Christian and Platonic mysticism flowed together at Alexandria, where Philo had already grafted the flower of Neoplatonic mysticism upon the stock of Judaic theism. Together they produced a school of religious philosophy in which Christian faith sought, with more or less

success, to ally itself with the dialectic of Platonism, on the one hand, and on the other with the quest for direct illumination that characterised the later development of the Platonic schools. The mystical theology of Dionysius represents, on the whole, the permanent results of this combination. In this treatise we have a kind of grammar of mysticism in which principles alone are formulated, disengaged alike from the experience and argumentation through which they had been evolved, and awaiting the fuller clothing of concrete personal experience subsequently imparted to them by later mystical writers. Though received at first with suspicion, the writings of Dionysius soon attained a position of authority not less commanding in its day than that of St Thomas in later times. We could scarcely have had either the Sentences or the Summa without them; and their echoes may be heard, even when, as is not often the case, their direct influence may not be detected, in every mystical writer since the time of their appearance.

It is probably a mistake to look for any

direct filiation, or continuity of historical succession, among the mystical writers of successive ages and periods. Here, as elsewhere, it can scarcely be doubted that the most important part of history is that which has never been written. Mystical teachers and writers were forced into prominence by circumstances; but it is more than probable that circumstances had no influence on the general craving for knowledge of the unseen and abiding reality which underlies the endless vicissitudes of human life, as they could have none upon the sources from which that need is supplied. Such circumstances were the ceaseless wars which "made Europe one vast camp" in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the intellectual and moral upheavals of the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation; and in our own day the breaking up of old traditions and institutions, and the birth of new principles, ideas and customs — the forerunners, as it would seem, of a new order of things the character of which no man can yet forecast. In such times, when the instability of human things,

or the feebleness of human reason, is forced with special insistence upon men's notice, the teaching of the mystic has an attractive force which in quieter periods it seems to lack; and it is at such times that a Gerson, a Tauler, a Ruysbroeck or a Teresa is moved to tell of the "inner way" in which true peace of mind may be found amid the illusion, instability and restlessness of outward life. But it can hardly be doubted that in all times alike there are countless elect souls to whom mystical knowledge is as the air they breathe, but who are more than content to be "mute and inglorious" to the end of their days.

It would have been strange if such an abiding demand of humanity in general had never been met with a counterfeit supply. Parallel with the current of true mysticism there has been a nearly continuous succession of the spurious kind in which, though conscious imposture is perhaps hardly to be found or suspected, a greater or less degree of illusion is easily discernible. It would indeed scarcely be possible to say how far

the Pythagorean contemplatives or the Neoplatonist ecstatics come under this head;[1] the latter, at least, have nothing in common with the theosophic extravagances of Gnostics, Montanists and later sects, whose militant propagandism seems strangely at variance with their professed principles. The initial inconsistency of the supposition that the *depositum* of revelation needs to be superseded, amplified or modified by mystical communications imparted to a single irresponsible person—a Priscilla, a Mohammed, a Joachim, a Boehme or an Irving—of itself goes far to discredit the doctrines professedly so received. We shall consider later the criteria by which the true is to be distinguished from the false or doubtful mysticism; it is enough for the present to remark that mysticism forms no exception to the rule, that the value of precious things is attested by the abundance of their imitators.

[1] Tauler credits "Proclus and Plato" with a true mystical knowledge of God (*Sermon on St John Baptist*).

CHAPTER III

THE NATURE OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The characteristic by which mystical states or experiences of every kind are distinguished from other states and experiences which have points of resemblance to them is that they are directly and immediately supernatural. Mystical contemplation is the highest and closest of those human relations with God of which the opposite extreme is represented by the condition of simple dependence, necessarily involved in mere created existence. Immediately above this comes the recognition by self-conscious beings of this dependence; and after that, as a necessary consequence, the rational deduction of the personal, infinite and simple nature of God. Above this again comes the sense of indirect personal relations with God, through the medium of our created

environment, and most completely and perfectly through the operation of grace. With this consciousness comes also inevitably the desire to cultivate these relations and maintain them at their highest point of efficacy; and thus both reason and free-will are drawn into the universal accord in which each element, from the lowest to the highest, fills its allotted place and discharges its most congenial function. Rational beings who, by failing to recognise these relations, choose to hold the position of the irrational and inanimate part of creation are, as rational beings, out of accord with the general scheme: yet the loss is theirs only; the scheme is not affected by their failure to occupy the place which they might hold. They cannot but suffer individually from the consequences of their choice — which is to assimilate the rational to the irrational, the spiritual to the material; but the scheme holds good for them as for the irrational beings whose place they have elected to share.

But the crown and summit of the whole system is that direct intercourse of the soul with God, which, ordinarily at least, pre-

supposes the sacramental life of grace, but is itself something more than that.

It is a state in which the natural and ordinary action of the soul is modified, and in which even the organic functions of the body are to a certain extent in abeyance.

We may therefore distinguish the three conditions thus. First, the mere subjection, unconscious or involuntary, to the divine will, which no created being can escape. Next, the conscious realisation of this general dependence, which includes all that is meant by natural religion, and is enriched and amplified by the knowledge which revelation imparts, and the elevation of the natural faculties which is the effect of divine grace. To this state belongs the kind of contemplation known as natural or acquired (in the sense that it is obtained by the exercise of the natural powers). This state is sometimes called mystical. But it is not truly so; for it implies the exercise of natural powers on natural objects, though under supernatural guidance, but not the supersession of their natural objects by special and supernatural

influence. The mind in this state, illuminated by faith, but by the exercise of its own reasoning power, conceives an idea—say of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Sacramental presence of Christ, or the wonders of divine providence—and contemplates it with satisfaction, and even with delight and enthusiasm. The practice of ordinary meditation will lead, if not uniformly, at least occasionally to contemplation of this kind. Its object is not immediately supernatural, though the action of the mind takes place with supernatural assistance; and it does not differ in kind, nor indeed always in degree, from such pleasurable contemplation as is induced by mastering a scientific problem, following out a logical argument, or even reading a poem or a novel. In all these instances alike there are the same elements—intellectual study, the development of a concept or idea, and the "affective" contemplation of it.[1] Such meditation and con-

[1] St Teresa, Castle, 4. 1. 4. "Sweetness in devotion . . . is natural, although ultimately it comes from the grace of God. We shall find that many temporal matters give us the same pleasure, such as unexpectedly coming into a large fortune, meeting with a friend, or succeeding in any important affair."

templation, when their object is divine truth, are indeed the highest exercise of the natural powers. And the special supernatural impulse and support under which it takes place must be clearly distinguished from the mere divine *concursus*, which is common to all human acts.

But the object of this contemplation is not in itself directly supernatural; it is produced according to the general laws which can be observed in all human thought and feeling. That is, such contemplation is not in the true sense mystical.

The essentially supernatural character of the truly mystical state is perhaps best illustrated by the passivity which all writers on the subject hold to be its most characteristic feature. God is not discovered by the mystic; indeed this special manifestation of Him may not, strictly speaking, be even sought. He makes Himself known "experimentally"; and the person so favoured contributes nothing, at least directly, to this result.[1] In all natural

[1] Such criticism as that of Mr Inge ("Christian Mysticism," pp. 111, 112) would be perfectly just if mystical contemplation were held to be a merely natural process. All the human mind can do towards attaining it is merely negative, and in the

cognition—*i.e.*, in the acquisition of anything that may rightly be called knowledge, however complex, recondite or elementary—there must always be a preponderating element of mental activity. There must be not merely sensation and intelligent consciousness, but "apperception"—the active direction of the mind to the object before it, together with the complex process of analysis, abstraction, distinction and comparison which underlies the simplest act of cognition. Such activity is involved in the perception of a tree, a house or a flower, in the reproduction by the help of imagination or memory of an idea; or in the recognition of an acquaintance. But in all mystical states this process is absent. God takes possession of the mental powers and focusses them upon Himself, and those which from their nature cannot be so focussed are left idle. Memory, imagination, or will may or may not be in use, according to the nature of the experience, but the discursive reason is necessarily in

natural order the result of such mere negation or abstraction is zero. But it is just because of this that true mysticism is perceived to be supernatural. The blank can really be filled only by divine agency, not by human "hypostatisation."

abeyance. In point of fact, mystical cognition is to the soul precisely what sensation is to the body.

We do not reason in order to ascertain whether we feel heat or cold, pain or pleasure; we are simply aware of the fact. Sensation cannot be defined, or even described, otherwise than in terms of other sensations; and its occurrence is not susceptible of proof, otherwise than by very inconclusive circumstantial evidence. One cannot prove directly that one has a toothache, or that the subject in a hypnotic trance has no sensation of the pins thrust into his flesh by the operator; we have only his word for it. In the same way, mystical experience is a matter of direct contact between God and the soul; its conditions may possibly be ascertainable up to a certain point, as those of sensation are, but it cannot be precisely either defined, explained or proved.[1] It follows that the mystical experi-

[1] "Une âme recueillie sous le regard de Dieu peut, à l'aide de l'imagination, se representer Dieu présent en elle. . . . Mais cette image de Dieu, dont nous sommes les auteurs, ne ressemble en rien à la réalité que la contemplation mystique nous fait sentir. C'est Dieu lui-même, et non plus son image que nous aperçevons."—Lejeune, *Vie Mystique*, p. 10.

ence is not to be obtained by any means within the power of the person who desires it. It is, obviously, no more possible to ensure experience of this kind by any deliberate course of action than it is to obtain a particular kind of weather by the exercise of one's own powers. Here lies, in fact, the great practical difference between mystical states and those which belong to the ordinary economy of divine grace, a difference which hardly seems to have been always clearly present to the minds of some writers on the subject.

By the fulfilment of certain conditions the devout Christian can attain with certainty to the enjoyment of an abundant measure of grace, sufficient or more than sufficient for all his needs. The effects of prayer and of the sacraments are certain, and are within the reach of all who choose to make use of these means of spiritual advancement. Moreover, the rational appreciation of the mysteries of the Christian faith is open to all, independently of natural ability or acquired skill; they offer an abundantly sufficient field to the reason and imagination of all men, whether

lettered or unlettered, whether intellectually acute or dull; they adapt themselves, like the objects of universal desire in the life of the senses, to the capacity and character of each separate individual. The joys and conflicts and anxiety of the life of grace are equally real to the refined and learned and to the rude and ignorant, and, fundamentally, they are the same for all; but there can be no doubt that they are apprehended under somewhat different forms by persons of different character and education — as the satisfaction of the desire for food conveys an identical pleasure to the epicure and the ploughman alike, but the kind of food preferred (as distinct from its chemical qualities) is different in each case.

But there are no conditions by the fulfilment of which mystical experience may be ensured; and its character, unlike that of ordinary religious experience, in no way depends on either the efforts or the natural endowments of the person who undergoes it. The mystic is the mere recipient of the favours bestowed on him; he can do nothing

towards either procuring them or determining their special character. Mysticism is therefore to be conceived as the *raptus* or *ecstasis* of St Paul and St Thomas:[1] it is outside the natural sphere of human life, and in respect of all natural experience it has consequently no place or function; for it all natural objects of perception are involved in "darkness" and "ignorance," and the ordinary functions of sense and intellect are for the time being directed by the "new supernatural aptitude" of which St John of the Cross speaks. "Our Lord," says St Teresa, "does not require the faculties or senses to open the door of the heart to Him; they are all asleep." "We can do nothing," she adds, "on our part."

"Simple unity with God," says Ruysbroeck, "can be felt and possessed by none, save by those who stand before the immense brightness, without reason and without restraint."[2]

[1] 2 Cor. vii.; *Summa*, 2. 2. 175 1. c., and *cf.* St Bernard (De Inter. Domo). "Necesse est ad cor altum ascendere et mentis excessu per divinam revelationam addiscere, quid sit illud ad quod adspirare vel studere oporteat, et ad qualem sublimitatis habitum animum suum componere et assuescere debeat."

[2] Ruysbroeck, *De Calculo*.

Thus the consciousness of free rational beings returns to that simplicity of divine relations which, at the other end of the scale of creation, appears as the perfect mechanical fulfilment by inanimate and irrational creatures of their divinely appointed destiny. The human intellect has, in some sense, arrived at the goal of its desires when it can say "ut jumentum factus sum apud Te."

Another obviously necessary consequence of the passive condition of the soul which marks all truly mystical states is the certainty as to the real character of those states which accompanies them. Here, again, there is an exact parallel in sense-experience. Sensation is, as we have remarked, incapable of being defined or proved; the one thing that we know about it is that it occurs. Whatever the conditions may be, and whether there is an adequate cause present or not, the one indubitable fact in sensation is the certainty of the experience. A person may feel cold in circumstances which cause others to feel hot; or he may not feel anything under conditions which cause most people to feel

a great deal — or again in some peculiar affections of the nerves he may feel intense pain without any apparent cause. Yet his sensations are in every case undeniably facts. This is precisely the case of the mystic: he is certain of the divine communication, though he cannot prove it; and his conviction that it is divine is unshakeable.[1]

It must, however, be clearly understood that this subjective certitude is not to be taken for a proof that the experience so certified is a genuinely mystical one. Benedict XIV., in his treatise *De Canonisatione*, gives a long list of natural conditions which may give rise to apparently mystical experiences — such as nervous excitement, hysteria, memory association and disease.[2] Professor James gives a nearly identical list of such causes. Certainty is a *conditio sine qua non*—without it, no mystical experience can be considered genuine,[3] but it is not therefore inconsistent with deception. Precisely the same thing, of course, may

[1] James, *Varieties*, loc. cit.

[2] *Heroic Virtue* (Oratorian translation), vol. iii. ch. x.

[3] St Teresa, Castle, 5. 1. 9: "A soul which does not feel this assurance has not been united to God entirely."

be said about sensation. A sensation is a fact of experience, and differs altogether from the most vivid imaginary presentment of the same fact; we can never mistake one for the other. But we may be widely mistaken as to the cause of our sensations; and we may, on the other hand, be deluded by memory or imagination as to the actual occurrence of sensations in the past. We may so vividly imagine certain sensations as to think that we must have actually experienced them at some time; as some people are said to have told a fictitious story so often that they have come to believe it. But in such cases the clear realisation of a definite and particular sensation is certainly absent. In the same way delusions as to past supposed mystical experiences are by no means unknown. But in such cases there is a complete absence of the circumstantiality which is characteristic of all accounts of genuine experiences; and on the other hand, there is generally a definiteness and descriptive plausibility in accounts of the memory-created experiences themselves which is invariably absent from the genuine ones.

The reason of this is to be found in another feature of genuine mysticism, namely, the impossibility of describing the experiences of mystical states in anything like detail. In the case of visions it is true that certain salient features of the appearances are distinctly remembered and described; and in "locutions" the phrases heard or understood can be repeated from memory. But these, as will be more fully explained later, are the "accidents" of mysticism.[1] Its essence is direct contact with a transcendental reality; and this, from its nature, is incapable of being described in the terms of ordinary sense-experience to which human language is necessarily limited.[2] Mysticism can make

[1] "These (corporeal) visions, inasmuch as they are visions of created things, between which and God there is no congruity or proportion, cannot subserve the understanding as proximate means of divine union."—*Asc. of Carmel*, ii. xxiv. "These supernatural visitations are nothing else but the motes of the Spirit."—*Ib.* ii. xix.

St Teresa only knows such visions from hearsay. "Of bodily apparitions I can say nothing; for the person I mentioned (herself) never experienced anything of this kind herself, and therefore could not speak about it with certainty." — Castle, 6. 9. 3.

[2] *Cf.* Bossuet's *Instr. sur les États d'Oraison.* "Elevés à une oraison dont ils ne pouvaient expliquer les sublimités par le

no use of the terms of sense-experience to describe what is supersensible; and its opportunities are far too limited to enable it to construct a descriptive terminology of its own. The consciousness of the actual divine presence admits of no description; only the bare fact can be stated, apart from its effect on the person who experiences it.

But though the mystical vision of God is a thing which cannot be obtained by natural

langage commun, ils ont été obligés d'enfler leur style pour nous donner quelque idée de leurs transports." And St Teresa (Castle, 7. 1. 9): "By some mysterious manifestation of the truth, the three Persons of the most Blessed Trinity reveal themselves, etc. Thus that which we hold as a doctrine of faith the soul now, so to speak, understands by sight, although it beholds the Blessed Trinity by neither bodily nor spiritual eyes." And again (Castle, 6. 5. 9): "These visions, and many other things impossible to describe, are revealed by some wonderful intuition that I cannot explain." "On returning to itself, the mind can recall what has been seen, but is unable to describe it." B. Angela of Foligno: "Divine operations went on in my soul which were so ineffable that neither angel nor saint could relate or explain them."

St John of the Cross (*Asc.* ii. 28): "Moses was unable to describe what he learned of God in that particular knowledge and so gave utterance to ordinary words. Though, at times, when this knowledge is vouchsafed to the soul, words are uttered, yet the soul knows full well that it has in no wise expressed what it felt because it is conscious that there are no words of adequate signification."

means, being God's free gift, and altogether beyond the sphere of nature, it is nevertheless not only possible but, ordinarily speaking, necessary to prepare for it — to make the soul fit, so far as that is possible, for the guest whom it hopes to receive.[1] Though no amount of preparation can ensure His coming, it is nevertheless not to be hoped for unless the soul has been made ready for Him. This preparation is merely negative in regard to the supernatural state to which it is preliminary, consisting as it does in the purification of the soul from actual sin, from worldly desires and negligent habits. But in itself it is, of course, positive enough, and its benefits are definite and substantial. It is, indeed, nothing less than the fullest Christian life, the fulfilment of all the conditions of salvation, and even of eminent sanctity. Mystical states, as we may see more clearly later on, are not by any means necessary to holiness, and it is at least ideally

[1] Gerson, *Myst. Theol.*, Cons. xxx. "Mystica theologia acquiritur per scholam affectus et per exercitium vehemens moralium virtutum, disponentium animam ad purgationem."

possible to attain the highest sanctity without any mystical experience whatever, in the true or Dionysian sense.[1] The first four of St Teresa's "mansions" are mainly occupied by this preparation for the favours to be received in the last three. The "Fourth Mansion" consists of a blending of the natural and supernatural in the "prayer of recollection" and the "prayer of quiet"; the subsequent "prayer of union" and "spiritual marriage" are wholly supernatural.

The precise nature of mystical contemplation as distinguished from other spiritual or intellectual functions more or less connected with and resembling it is defined in practically the same way, though with a varying amount of detail, by all mystical writers. It is perhaps most clearly and briefly expressed by Gerson, who follows substantially Hugo of St Victor, and the more elaborately subdivided but essentially identical method of Richard, his successor. The powers of the soul, Gerson says, are divisible into cognitive and affective; mystical theology is the object

[1] *See* Poulain, *Des Graces d'Oraison*, and *Asc.* ii. v. 8.

of the latter, as speculative theology is of the former. The cognitive powers are those of intelligence, reason and sense-perception; the affective appetite, will and *synderesis*, or the natural perception and consequent desire of good. St Thomas considered this last to be not a power, but a natural intellectual habit; and though Gerson, like other mystical writers, speaks of it as a *potentia animae*, he expressly guards himself against the supposition that he is constructing a system of real psychological distinctions. The powers are distinct, he says, not in reality but in name; for his immediate purpose, however, he finds it convenient to treat them as if they were really distinct in nature.[1]

The two sets of faculties work together. Their first or last function is mere cogitation —the discursive consideration of the objects of sense: then comes meditation, or the concentrated application of the reason to these objects, and the production by it of abstract ideas; these, again, can be contemplated by the simple intelligence apart from sense-

[1] *Myst. Theol.*, Cons. ix.; *cf. Summa Theol.*, I. 79. 12.

perception. So far all is natural; the cognitive and affective faculties act mutually on one another, and on the objects presented to them. But above all natural objects is the divine presence, which is known — by special divine favour—not as an abstract idea resulting from meditation,[1] but as the immediate object of love, in the rapture or exaltation of the soul above itself which is the effect of love whether natural or supernatural. Thus "he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit."

It is plain that according to this analysis the experimental knowledge, vision, or contemplation of God takes place through the agency of the natural powers of the soul; the supernatural factor is the gratuitous divine communication which the soul receives. Some obscurity, however, has been caused by the language of some of the more speculative mystics on this point. Eckhart, and after him

[1] *Myst. Theol.*, Cons. xliii. "In anima contemplativa amor, et mystica theologia et oratio perfecta aut idem sunt, aut se invicem praesupponunt. Nam, ut patet ex praedictis, mystica theologia est cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per conjunctionem affectus spiritualis cum eodem—quae nimirum adhaesio fit per extaticum amorem, teste beato Dionysio."

Tauler, speak of the "ground" of the soul—its core or essence, to which the corresponding "ground" or nature of the Godhead communicates itself in virtue of a certain natural affinity which exists between the two. This "ground" of the soul is also called the "spark" (*scintilla*, *fünkelein*) or "apex"—as the purest or highest part, and the fittest therefore to be the medium of the divine self-communication. Eckhart's pantheistic tendencies seem to have led him to assimilate the "spark" to the divine nature, as homogeneous if not in some sense identical with it. Tauler keeps clear of this mistake; and with Gerson the *scintilla* or *apex mentis* is merely a name for the intellect, which is the contemplative faculty.[1] With Ruysbroeck the "ground" is the mirror in which the Divine Being is reflected; St John of the Cross calls it the "substance of the soul," or again the "eye of the soul, which is the understanding," and the recipient of the divine illumination. But the light may be so excessive as to cause darkness; and so we come back to the

[1] *See* Inge, "Christian Mysticism," Appendix C.

Dionysian phraseology, in which darkness and ignorance are the means of seeing and knowing. But all this is evidently the language of practical devotion, and not (except perhaps in the case of Eckhart) of speculative theology, still less of analytical psychology. What it amounts to is no more than the doctrine that the soul has a faculty by means of which it can, when God so pleases, contemplate Him directly and even become united to Him. We shall consider in the next chapter what the nature of the process on its human side may be supposed to be.

It is somewhat strange that such writers as Hugo and Richard of St Victor, St Bonaventure and Gerson should be spoken of as having attempted to "reconcile" mysticism with scholasticism. They were never at variance, and no reconciliation was either necessary or possible, unless in the sense in which all theory may be considered as attempting to reconcile fact with itself. Scholasticism set itself to give a reasoned account of man's nature and total environment; mysticism was one of the great facts which it was bound

to take into consideration; and the Platonic elements in the earlier mysticism came into it in no other way than this. But mysticism is not itself either Platonic or Aristotelian; on its natural side it is simply human, and falls into its inevitable place in the order of things which all systems of philosophy seek to analyse and explain.[1] Mysticism is always recognisably the same thing, whether we meet it in a Platonic or a scholastic dress.

What, then, may be called the normal course of mysticism proceeds first by way of devout preparation in the discharge of ordinary Christian duties and the use of ordinary means of grace; next, it leads the soul into the immediate presence of God, as an experienced reality, and not merely as a concept or imagination; and the third stage, described in various terms by various writers, consists of a progressive union with God — a union

[1] Eckhart is said to have drawn his philosophy mainly from St Thomas. Of Dionysius, who is too often treated as a mere Platonist, Corderius says: "Observatu dignissimum, quomodo S. Dionysius primus Scholasticae Theologiae jecerit fundamenta, quibus ceteri deinceps theologi eam quae de Deo rebusque divinis in Scholis traditur doctrinam omnem inaedificarunt."—*Observationes Generales in Dion.*, 12.

which is not merely a matter of conviction, the mere union of will which is the privilege of all devout persons, but a fact of experience consciously realised. "In it," says St John of the Cross, "the soul seems to be God rather than itself, and indeed is God by participation, though in reality preserving its own natural substance as distinct from God as it did before, although transformed in Him."

St Teresa's well-known subdivision of this last or supernatural stage is threefold—the prayer of quiet or recollection in its higher form, in which the sense of the divine presence is communicated to the soul and contemplated passively by it; the prayer of union, which is "a foretaste of heaven," and in which the soul "seems to have left its mortal covering (though this is not really the case) to abide more entirely in God"; and lastly, the "spiritual marriage," in which the soul is no longer absorbed or lost in God, but recovers the exercise of its powers, though in an exalted and supernatural way, and "sees and understands somewhat of the grace received in a strange and wonderful manner

by means of intellectual vision." Thus "the three persons of the most Blessed Trinity reveal themselves; the doctrine which we hold by faith, the soul now, so to speak, understands by sight." It is remarkable that St Teresa, like all other mystics, in spite of the minuteness and particularity of her classification, is able to tell us little or nothing of the actual content of these blissful experiences. She exhausts herself in passionate insistence on the delight they impart to the soul; but as to the precise cause and nature of it she has nothing to say; and as little can she convey what is to be understood by the "intellectual vision," which is neither of the bodily nor of the spiritual eyes. The reason is, as we have already seen, that these things are indescribable, for want of existing words in which to describe them or of natural experience with which to compare them. Each fragment of mystical knowledge is like a ἅπαξ λεγόμενον in the language of human understanding.

Visions and locutions, or voices, may or may not occur in the states of union; they do not occur in any other. Visions are imaginary—

i.e., quasi-sensible figures pictured to the imagination without causing actual sensation—or spiritual; the latter are of two kinds, one of corporeal substances perceived, according to St John of the Cross, "in a certain light emanating from God," in which the distant things of heaven and earth may be seen; and the other kind consists of incorporeal existences, perceived after the same supernatural manner.

Locutions in like manner may be either mentally formed phrases representing thoughts or impressions produced by divine grace in the soul while in a state of recollection, or they may be formed in the mind by direct supernatural agency.

But visions and locutions are, it must be repeated, not necessarily a part of mystical experience; and all mystical writers agree in asserting that they are, in any case, the least important part. In practice all authorities teach that they are to be entirely disregarded. It is true that the experience of such mystics as B. Margaret Mary Alacoque, Blessed Julian of Norwich or Anne Catherine Emmerich

appears to consist entirely of visions and voices. But in these three cases, and in countless others, it will be found that the mode in which thoughts were conveyed to, and emotions excited in the person is of quite secondary importance. In these cases, the communications come through visions of our Lord seen under various aspects, and declaring His will and desires in formally understood words. But it was not the mere vision or quasi-vocal communication in itself that gave value to the experience, or constituted its title to acceptance as genuine, either in the mind of the actual recipient or in the opinion of those who afterwards had to pronounce judgment on the nature of the case. It was always the manifestation of the love and patience of the divine humanity that was both the source of consolation and the guarantee of reality.

The possibility of self-delusion in such a matter (without considering the possibility of diabolical deception) is, of course, almost inexhaustible, and no mystical writer fails to warn his readers against this danger; which,

it may be well to remark, in the processes of beatification and canonisation is kept constantly in view, and, as has been already noticed, is strongly insisted on by Benedict XIV. in his treatise on the subject.

CHAPTER IV

THE OBJECT OF MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Mystical contemplation is the sight of God. It cannot be called anything else, though obviously sight or vision is not quite an appropriate word to describe a process essentially different from any of those to which the term is commonly applied. We speak of "seeing" indeed, not only when we mean the exercise of a bodily organ of sense, but also, by a metaphor, when we mean the intellectual perception of an idea, or a truth presented to us from without. But mystical sight is neither of these. It is not bodily sight, because God is invisible; and it is not intellectual perception, because in mystical contemplation it is not an idea that is seen, but a living reality. In meditation the thoughts or ideas abstracted from the subject under consideration are con-

templated; but in mystical or supernatural contemplation it is God Himself that is the object perceived, not any idea of Him or any thoughts about Him. It is a unique mode of perception, corresponding to the unicity of that which is perceived. Nevertheless, it has this point of similarity to bodily sight, that the object is directly and immediately perceived; it is analogously to the soul what sight is to the body. All language in which such vision may be described suffers from the difficulty and liability to misapprehension which besets it whenever it deals with transcendental realities. Thus the persons of the Blessed Trinity can only be spoken of in metaphorical or analogous terms; paternity, filiation, procession, have in this connection meanings very different from those which belong to the words in their ordinary use. The mystical sight of God, then, is not sight of the bodily kind, nor is it in any way like ordinary intellectual perception: it is something entirely separate and different from all normal experiences of body and soul. The soul, indeed, still exercises its natural powers, or some of

them; but it exercises them under entirely abnormal conditions, created by the character of the object with which it has to deal.

This object is God: but we naturally ask how the soul can see God — how we can suppose God so to present Himself to the soul as to be directly perceived by it. For the proper function of the soul is to think, understand and will: and those functions presuppose abstract ideas, singly or combined, as their objects. But *ex hypothesi* it is not an abstract idea that the mystic contemplates: God does not present Himself in the shape of a concept or a proposition, for if He did so, He would not be directly present; the object of contemplation would not be God, but only the contemplative's idea or thought about Him. But then what else but an idea or proposition can it conceivably be that the soul perceives in the "intellectual vision"? It appears to be the difficulty of determining this point that has led many to suppose that the immediate and external character of mystical vision is a delusion; that it is really no more than the contemplation of an idea

or an image drawn from the recesses of past experience and thought, by some unconscious or subconscious process. Certainly there would be much to be said for this view if we were really unable to detect any possible affinity between the soul and the mystical object of its intellectual perception; though, even so, the persistent testimony of generations of mystics to the fact might well cause one to hesitate before accepting an explanation which explains it away.

The difficulty, it should be noticed in the first place, is not confined to mystical theology. It is just as urgent if we ask how any rational creature can see God at any time and under any conditions. How can the blessed see Him eternally in Heaven? They are still rational beings; they undergo, intellectually at least, no radical change when they pass from time to eternity; and yet the whole of their beatitude consists in the vision of God, not by any means in merely thinking about Him. If then we are to reject the mystics' account of their contemplative vision on this ground, we must equally reject the doctrine

of the Church and the statements of Scripture as to the beatific vision hereafter — which practically amounts to rejection of Christianity altogether.[1]

But it need hardly be said that there is no such obvious lacuna in the account which Christianity gives of itself as would entitle any one to reject it as inadequate. The *modus* of the beatific vision can be explained quite sufficiently to show its entire consistency with what we know of the necessary relations between the human intelligence and its natural object; and the same explanation removes the difficulty—which at first sight seems insurmountable — of attributing to the object of mystical knowledge any higher degree of external reality than belongs to the ordinary "Universal."

This difficulty, we have seen, consists in

[1] Corderius points out that since the soul is capable of exercising certain functions without the direct co-operation of the senses, and is able to exist in a disembodied state, a purely spiritual vision is not contrary to its nature. He adds that the mystical vision is not so precisely "quidditative" as the beatific—*i.e.*, the divine essence (which no creature can fully comprehend) is much less clearly known in the one than in the other. ("Quaestio Mystica," in Dion. *Myst. Theol.*, c. v.)

the disparity between the human intellect and the divine personality. What we want to understand is the principle on which it may be supposed that the intellect becomes directly conscious of the divine presence without reasoning or abstraction, when its natural function is simply to reason or abstract, and not to perceive by immediate intuition.

St Thomas Aquinas considers the question at great length, and his conclusion is substantially this. The vision of God by the blessed in Heaven is not mere vision, but union ; they see God as He is in Himself, not from a distance as sensible objects are seen, nor by a discursive intellectual process as intelligible ideas are perceived, but, so to speak, from within. They are not, it is needless to say, pantheistically merged in God, but united to Him by His supernatural action, so that the consciousness in the soul of the divine presence is akin to, and in some sense bound up with, its consciousness of itself. Therefore as our self-consciousness is intellectual and yet immediate, so also the

beatific vision of God is both immediate and intellectual.

In scholastic language, the *species intelligibilis* or abstract idea on which the mind works is practically the "form" of the mind, the mind itself (considered apart from its action, as *in potentia*), standing in the place of "matter"; this is the normal method of the intellect's operation. But for those who see God, He becomes Himself the "form" to the soul's "matter," so that He is known directly, as the soul knows its own natural ideas.[1] Even so, however, though the action of the intellect is normal in kind, it is in degree far above the ordinary and natural sphere of the intellect. It therefore requires a special divine assistance to enable it to work in this lofty atmosphere; and this assistance (which St Thomas calls the *lumen gloriae* and considers a created "quality," of the nature of grace) is imparted by the fact of the mystical union.

[1] *Cf.* Blosius, *Spiritual Mirror*, xi. 1. "This mystical denuded union takes place when a soul is carried above itself by the grace of God, and through the brilliancy of the divine light shining on the mind is united to God without any medium, and is transformed and changed into Him."

The difference between the *visio beatificans* of heaven, and the mystical vision of persons still living on earth, is merely that the one is habitual and permanent, and the other transient and exceptional; and whereas the union of the blessed extends to the risen body by a kind of reaction, so that the body takes part in the vision with the soul with which it is substantially united, the divine vision for the "viator" is restricted to the soul, and involves as a pre-requisite the temporary abstraction of the soul from the processes of the body.

Thus St Paul "knew not" whether his mystical vision was "in the body or out of the body"—*i.e.*, the body had no part in the union, though it could not but be affected by the psychical state (probably in the direction of quiescence rather than of any special activity). The Apostle was not conscious for the time of anything that took place in the body. It was a transient visitation of the *lumen gloriae*.

There is no need, for our present purpose, to take this explanation (which perhaps will scarcely be intelligible to any one who is

unacquainted with the terminology of scholasticism) as a true account. The reader may, if he will, consider it as a mere hypothesis. What it does, whether true or not, is to show that an analysis of intellectual processes can be constructed which is perfectly consistent with the admission of direct and objective intellectual intuition of a transcendental reality; and this is all that is required to remove the apparent disparity between the intellect and its mystical object.

It is worth while, however, to notice how entirely St Thomas's theoretical account corresponds with the descriptions given by mystics of their actual experiences.

First, the state of actual vision is always transient. St Teresa says it lasts not more than half an hour at most: St John of the Cross that the "actual" union of the faculties of the soul with God must in this life be transient of necessity; though there is an "habitual" vision, which is also supernatural, but permanent, and may be considered as the consequence of the actual union, and of the nature of an exalted faith in the permanent

(or "immanent") divine presence in the soul.[1] This element of permanence we shall consider later.

Next, it is a state of union, or "spiritual marriage"—at least in its complete or most fully conscious form; and it is evident that the union of quasi-matter and quasi-form described by St Thomas (compared by him, after Albertus, to the union between soul and body) is happily expressed by this figure, so constantly made use of by mystics. St Teresa could not distinguish between herself and God while in the state of rapture; and St John of the Cross says that "the soul seems to be God rather than itself, and indeed is God by participation."[2]

[1] "Dopo questa visione sente sempre l'anima Iddio nel suo interno, mai non si separa da quella divina compagnia, nè mai più perda una certa unione abituale con essolei—questo però non si intende, che sia in quel modo, che accade la prima volta e altre volte che Iddio le vuole rinovare il predetto favore; perchè se fosse così, non sarebbe possibile trattare con gli uomini, anzi ne pure vivere. Ma sebene non vide sempre Iddio con tanta luce e tanto gaudio, lo spirito però si trova sempre in sua compagnia." (Scaramelli. Dottrina di S. G. della Croce. Tratt. iii. Art. 2) and *cf.* St Paul's reference to habitual union, 1 Cor. vi. 10; Gal. ii. 20.

[2] *Cf.* St Augustine, Conf. vii. x. "Tu assumpsisti me, ut viderer esse quod viderem, et nondum me esse qui viderem."

It is only in regard to this highest mystical state of intellectual vision that the difficulty we have been considering arises. Intellectual impressions or states of consciousness, and images or figures of any kind are not strictly manifestations of the divine essence; they are indeed supernatural manifestations of the presence of God, and as such differ in kind from the impressions or ideas produced subjectively by natural means,[1] but they are not the "face to face" visions. We shall consider in the next chapter the psychological problem involved in supernatural manifestations of this kind; at present we are only concerned with the actual content of the objects of mystical perception.

Thirdly, the "*lumen gloriae*" has a very distinct place in the experience of mystics. St Augustine speaks of the "changeless light" seen only by the eye of the soul, and different in kind, not merely in degree, from that which

[1] *Cf.* St John of the Cross, *Asc.* ii. 5. "The fitting disposition for that union is, not that the soul should understand, taste, feel or imagine anything on the subject of the nature of God, or any other thing whatever, but only that pureness and love which is perfect resignation, and complete detachment from all things for God alone."

all men see.[1] According to St John of the Cross, it is (like natural light) not itself the object of vision, but the means through which divine things are seen, and is the supernatural consequence of the "darkness" of faith in regard to all merely natural objects. St Teresa says that it "hardly shines at all in the first mansions"; but in the later ones it is a light "so unearthly that if during his whole lifetime any one had been trying to picture this and the wonders seen, he could not have succeeded"; and in the "spiritual marriage" the revelation of the Blessed Trinity is "preceded by an illumination which shines on the spirit like a most dazzling cloud of light." Ruysbroeck says "this light is not God, but is a mediator between the seeing thought and God. It is a light-ray from God—in it God shows Himself immediately, not according to the mode of His persons, but in the simplicity of His nature and essence." (The contrast between the unity of a common principle and the variety of individual experi-

[1] "Non hanc vulgarem et conspicuam omni carni, nec quasi eodem genere grandior erat, etc." (1. c.)

ence is here remarkably significant.) Julian of Norwich speaks of the "gracious light of Himself," by which God wills that we should have understanding.

St Augustine[1] distinguishes three kinds of vision—corporal, "spiritual," which is here the same as "imaginary," and intellectual. Of the first kind was the vision of Balthasar in the Book of Daniel; the second is exemplified in the vision of St Peter at Joppa; the third kind was experienced by St Paul in his vision of the "third heaven." But Balthasar was certainly not a mystic, and the revelation to St Peter, though of a higher kind, was of the nature of a grace *gratis data*—it was not for St Peter's benefit, but for those to whom he was to be sent. Such visions therefore are not essentially mystical, though certainly supernatural, and though manifestations of both kinds (especially the second) frequently accompany mystical experiences. Julian of Norwich says that her visions were of all three kinds: of the purely intellectual she can say only "the number of the words passed my understanding, and all

[1] *De Gen ad litt.*, xii. vii. *seq.*

my might; for they were in the highest, as to my sight. For therein is comprehended I cannot tell what, but the joy that I saw passeth all that heart can think, or soul desire."

This threefold classification is the generally accepted one among mystical writers. It represents clearly enough the whole range of the objects of mystical vision. These are, first, as we have seen, the actual consciousness of God in virtue of a formal union of the intellect with Him, which is the highest and perfect form of contemplation; secondly, the stimulation of the intellect in a supernatural manner, in such a way as to produce the direct consciousness of the divine presence —whether by means of an imaginary figure or sound of some sort, or by the production of a direct intellectual impression without any medium whatever, either in the senses or in the imagination;[1] and thirdly, by the

[1] *Cf.* Poulain, *Des Grâces d'Oraison.* "Dieu a deux façons possibles de se faire connaître, l'une a la manière des créatures, par une espèce créée, l'autre sans espèce; il peut en jouer le rôle. Or, disent les théologiens, ce dernier mode constitue la vision intuitive, celle du ciel; l'autre est le propre de la contemplation mystique." (It must be understood that this "species," or impression, *need not* be anything visual, auditory, or otherwise sensible; it *cannot* be anything merely natural.)

supernatural but real manifestation of a sensible image of some kind—such as was seen not only by Balthasar but by Abraham when in the theophany in which he "saw three and adored one," the Blessed Trinity was mystically exhibited to him under sensible quasi-human forms. It is obvious, as St John of the Cross points out at great length, that certainty as to the divine character of these experiences varies inversely with the degree of sensibility or quasi-sensibility which belongs to them. Sensible and imaginary impressions can arise from several kinds of natural causes; and it is consequently seldom, if ever, safe to say that they are certainly supernatural or divine in origin. The direct impression of the divine presence conveys, St Teresa says, as its chief characteristic an irrefragable feeling of certitude; and the highest state of union is no more to be misunderstood or evaded than the self-consciousness which is the underlying condition and guarantee of all human experience, natural as well as supernatural.

Lastly, it must be noticed that however

closely what may be called the lower kind of mystical experience may approach the ordinary experience of the senses in character, it must always be considered as entirely distinct from naturally caused sensations or ideas. The "knowledge of invisible things" from visible and created things is true knowledge, legitimately obtained; but it is not mystical. Nor is the moral union of the heart with God, or "union of conformity" of which spiritual writers speak, at all the same thing as the mystical union. The former must certainly exist before the latter can take place, but the two are not identical in any way. Knowledge obtained through philosophy, natural science, historical research or social or practical experience may and should deepen and strengthen, and may even be the means of creating an apprehension of God's reality and presence in the world and beyond it; and in proportion as men conform their actions and affections to the divine model and law, their devotion to the service of God and their happiness in it doubtless increase. But such knowledge and devotion and affection are

natural in themselves, though brought about by the supernatural influence of grace: they are not of the same kind (however high they may be in degree) as the supernatural knowledge and consequent affection which are properly called mystical. No service can be done to either by confusing them together.

CHAPTER V

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MYSTICISM

NEXT in order after the object of mystical contemplation we have to consider the mode in which that contemplation takes place. We have seen that the presence of God may be made known to the mystical consciousness in three ways — by formal union, by an intellectual impression, or species, with or without an imaginative representation or figure, and thirdly, by means of a representation of a sensible kind. The object of contemplation is unquestionably supernatural; but of what sort is the process, whether intellectual or physiological, by which the object is perceived? Is it also supernatural—*i.e.*, do the faculties of mind or body act in any other way or by any other principle than that in

which or by which they are accustomed to act?

The subject is necessarily a somewhat obscure one, comparatively little being certainly known as to the nature of the mind's action, and of its relation to that of the senses. But some quite overwhelming evidence, such as does not seem to be either forthcoming or even conceivable, would be necessary to prove that either the mind or the body or both together can, under any circumstances in this world, act otherwise than according to the accustomed methods and principles, which in their general plan at least are well enough ascertained. We have already seen strong reason for considering the supernatural element of mysticism to consist mainly in its object; that element in the perceiving subject being no more than the illumination and assistance of the natural faculties by divine grace, and not their supersession by any new power or faculty, or by the addition of any otherwise unknown function to those already possessed by them. As in the ordinary operation of divine grace so in its exceptional

operation, the natural faculties are indeed assisted and guided; but they continue to act according to the laws which they follow in the absence of any supernatural aid. The actions, both physical and intellectual, of a person under the influence of grace do not differ in kind from those of one who is outside that influence, and are open to precisely the same kind of investigation. Faith, for example, is not a sixth sense, or an extra intellectual faculty; it is merely the action of the intellect and will directed towards a particular subject, and dealing with a particular set of evidences, and is in itself no more mysterious than other modes of voluntary and intellectual activity. On Christian principles, indeed, faith is held to be due to supernatural assistance by means of a divinely infused virtue; but the *modus operandi* is obviously by no means changed by that infusion; the force of *motiva credibilitatis* and the weight of divine authority are estimated by faith in the same way as similar evidence is estimated in purely secular matters.

The supernatural character of mysticism is,

therefore, at least no bar to the investigation in a purely natural sense of the mental processes it may involve. Such enquiries as that of M. Delacroix, or of Professor W. James, whatever may be thought of their conclusions, are in no way excluded or discountenanced by acceptance of the supernatural explanation.

Dionysius, and later mystical writers, have not troubled themselves with any psychological theory in explanation of their experiences; they were, indeed, hardly in a position to do so. All that they were concerned with was to relate facts; though, naturally, they tended to relate them with so much attention to sequence and classification as to produce what is in effect a kind of theory, or *système psychologique privilegié*. But their accounts, though in some cases (of which St Teresa and St John of the Cross are the chief examples) they are perfectly systematic so far as they go,[1] do not address themselves to any consideration of the mode, whether partially

[1] Mr Inge remarks the general tendency among mystical writers of the supernatural kind to schematism. It may perhaps be explained as a natural attempt to minimise the insuperable difficulty of describing such experiences as theirs.

natural or wholly supernatural, in which the supernatural effects are produced. So far as they are concerned, the divine *modus operandi* may be considered an open question.

Three different views have been held on this point.

1. It has been supposed that man is endowed with some kind of special faculty by which he is enabled both to know God as existing, and in the higher stages of spirituality to enter into direct personal relation with Him. This faculty has often been supposed to be a distinct element in human nature. The νοῦς or spiritual part, which is designed exclusively for intercourse with the divine, is distinct from the ψύχη or intellect, which is concerned with created things—both being distinct again from the animal nature in mankind.[1] This view, sometimes called trichotomy, has been condemned by the Church as put forward by the Apollinarian heretics, and again in recent times as held by Günther; it was held in a professedly modified form by Occam, with-

[1] The Pauline division into body, soul and spirit (1 Thess. v.) must be understood to refer to the twofold function of the rational soul, not to two distinct substances.

out explicit and authoritative condemnation, though with much opposition. Again, the supposed faculty is held to be an endowment or power of the one soul, co-ordinate with but distinguishable from its faculties of reason and will.

In both forms, however, this theory seems to be gratuitous; since on the one hand no powers are attributed to the supposed special faculty which are not in one way or another exercised by the intellect under ordinary circumstances; and on the other hand, there can be no reason for supposing that God is unable, if He so desires, to communicate directly with man through his natural intellect, without having to create a special faculty for the reception of divine communications.

2. Directly opposed to this view is another, which holds the supposed mystical communications to have no external source, but to be wholly subjective experiences, due to the automatic working of the subconscious or "subliminal" self.[1] Much apparently uncon-

[1] W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*; Delacroix, *Mysticisme*. *Cf.* Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*, i. 158.

trovertible evidence has been adduced to show that the field of psychical experience extends far beyond that of actual consciousness; and that from time to time an automatic transference takes place from one to the other. Ideas appear to arise in the conscious intelligence without giving any indication of their origin, in sense or reason; they are evidently not consciously made by the intelligence, nor are they attributable to any external source which can be recognised by means of sense-perception. Thus they have all the appearance of purely spiritual communications proceeding from an external and transcendental region. The theory we are now considering holds that, on the principle that *entia non sunt multiplicanda præter necessitatem*, we are not justified in investing these experiences with any transcendental character, if, as is thought to be the case, they can be sufficiently accounted for by other means.

The question is, therefore, whether the theory of automatism does really provide a sufficient explanation of the facts.

It seems hardly possible to deny that most of the characteristic features of the states recorded by Catholic mystical writers as experienced by themselves, have been at various times produced in the experience of others who are neither Catholics nor mystics. The essential features of passivity, of incommunicableness, and of manifest reality are evident in many of the cases cited by James, some of which are the result of alcoholic stimulation, others of the influence of anæsthetics, and others again of pathological states; while some are apparently spontaneous.[1] Moreover, numbers of heretical and even immoral systems of religion or theosophy have depended for their authority on experiences which seem to exhibit characteristically mystical qualities, but which cannot, from the point of view of Catholic orthodoxy, be held to be genuine, and either must be considered purely natural, or else must be attributed to diabolical influence. This latter was the opinion of Görres, who made out a complete system of diabolical mysticism parallel in some sort with the divine.

[1] James, *op. cit.*, Lectures XVI. and XVII.

But in the case of Catholic mystics—and it may probably be admitted, in other cases exhibiting nearly similar features—there is no question of any such stimulus as that given by alcohol or drugs. Nor can their state be properly called pathological, unless in the very wide and somewhat fanciful sense in which the so-called inspirations of genius have been supposed to be so. Abnormal it certainly is; and there is no direct evidence to show that this abnormal state is not, as in some of the cases quoted by James, the spontaneous result of some obscure and possibly congenital abnormality of nervous constitution.[1] At the same time it must be noted that, as has already been pointed out, the great mystics show no signs of such abnormality, but are, on the contrary, rather remarkable for their mental and physical sanity in the ordinary affairs of life. Such mystics as St Bernard, St Catherine of Siena, St Teresa and St John of the Cross seem to be distinguished from the ordinary run of people in busines matters, only by their superior acumen. If indeed it

[1] *See* Benedict XIV., *Heroic Sanctity*, and *see* ch. i. pp. 35, 36.

is to be assumed that no personal God exists; or that God cannot communicate directly with the soul; or that man has no soul which can receive such communications—then, no doubt, the hypothesis, at present certainly unverifiable, of automatism may fairly be held to be the most probable explanation of the problem. But if no such presupposition is entertained; and still more if it is held, on independent grounds, that a God exists who is able, if He so chooses, to influence the soul of man directly and immediately, there seems to be no reason to deny that those cases of transcendental illumination, for which no physical cause can be assigned, may, with a degree of probability which approaches certainty, be attributed to divine agency. For here the question ceases to be a matter merely of psychological investigation: the moral probability of deception has also to be considered —that is to say, the probability that God would permit those who must be considered most deserving of His consideration to be the victims of a delusion as humiliating as the reality simulated by it would be ennobling.

If we start with the Christian presupposition of the nature of God it is impossible to believe the conviction universally entertained by the mystics of their immediate intercourse with God to be ill-founded: at the same time the theory of automatism seems to furnish at least a highly probable explanation of many quasi-mystical states to which this moral argument does not appear to be applicable. Those, on the other hand, who start with a contrary presupposition, or with none, are obviously free to apply the theory impartially to all cases alike.

3. The third view is a conciliation of the subjective and objective theories, first put forward definitely by Maine de Biran,[1] and adopted in a general way by Görres. In this

[1] *Vie de l'Esprit: sub fin.* *Cf.* Delacroix, p. 406. "Comme il est difficile de méconnaître l'identité psychologique des phénomènes de subconscience, qu'ils se présentent dans le Christianisme ou dans d'autres religions; ou bien sans d'autres formes que la forme religieuse, beaucoup d'esprits désireux de concilier le fait et la doctrine tendent à faire droit aux exigences de la psychologie, en expliquant psychologiquement la passivité religieuse, et à celles de la théologie, en maintenant que ce jeu de lois psychologiques représente le plan d'action divine sur les âmes; de sorte que le subconscient serait le véhicule de la grâce divine."

view the experience of the mystic is real, and consists, as he rightly believes, in immediate intuition of and communication with the divine being. But the manner in which the soul becomes conscious of the supernatural experience is natural, and from a certain point is the same as that in which it becomes conscious of the impressions automatically derived from the "transmarginal" sphere. That is to say, the soul undergoes a certain unconscious modification[1] (in the one case by means of a sense-impression, in the other by means of a purely spiritual communication), of which it subsequently becomes conscious by the very obscure process to which the title of automatism has been given in order to express its essentially non-volitional character. The way, whatever it may be, in which we become conscious of ideas derived from unnoticed sense-impressions may be identical with that in which the mystic becomes conscious of the immediate divine presence. He can give no account of the coming of this presence; suddenly he knows that it is there and he can say no more. In

[1] *Cf.* Maher, *Psychology*, p. 357.

the same way the mind becomes suddenly conscious of the solution of a difficult problem, of an artistic effect and the manner of its production, or of an overmastering moral impulse, without being able to explain or account for its origin. There is certainly a strong apparent similarity between the flashes of inspiration which are held to constitute or indicate genius and the mystical intuition of an objective divine presence and of communications proceeding from a divine person; and the view which regards the rise of the ideas into consciousness as identical in method in every case seems to have much in its favour. The absence of any genuine (as distinct from imaginary) sensible impressions in the one case as compared with the fundamental importance of sense-impressions in the other need present no difficulty, so long as we admit the substantial reality of the soul, and refrain from identifying physiological with psychological conditions. It is not more difficult—and it may even appear less so—to conceive of a psychical state produced, whether consciously or unconsciously, by direct spiritual agency, than to

conceive of a psychical state resulting from a sense-impression. In the view now before us, the only difference between the two classes of experience is that a true mystical state is originated in the psychical sphere; pseudo-mystical or merely natural states have their origin in sense-impression, like all merely natural psychical states; but the psychical machinery by which a conscious state is produced we may consider to be the same in both cases.

It may be added that this distinction coincides practically with that which has been constantly made by ecclesiastical authority in dealing with the various types of apparently abnormal spiritual experience on which it has had to pronounce an opinion from time to time.[1] The possibility, or rather the strong probability, of deception of one kind or another has always been kept prominently in view; and it is only after much hesitation that any such case has been pronounced genuine. Each has been, as a rule, the subject of prolonged investigation and consideration; cases

[1] *See* Benedict XIV., *De Canon.* passim.

eventually found to be spurious have had their orthodox defenders, and genuine ones their equally orthodox antagonists. St Catherine of Siena, St John of the Cross, St Teresa, B. Margaret Mary Alacoque, and a host of others have had to undergo a more or less prolonged period of doubt, suspicion and even reprobation, before their experiences were accepted as genuine; and on the other hand, neither Molinos nor Madame Guyon lacked patronage in high places. It is enough, however, for practical purposes (and no other purpose can here be entertained) to distinguish genuine experiences from delusions. It is of little importance to know the nature of the delusion, which it is admitted might be either natural or directly diabolical in origin. Psychological considerations need not enter into the investigation; until very recently, indeed, it was scarcely possible that they should; but the fact of self-deception has always been familiar enough, however little may have been known about its nature.

Abnormal experiences may, therefore, be either genuine or cases of delusion, whether

natural or supernatural, and the theory last mentioned supplies a rational basis for this classification to which it seems difficult to take exception. At the same time, it must be remembered that the criterion which has mainly been made use of by Ecclesiastical authority is, and probably will always be, the external or "pragmatic" one of orthodoxy and morality. But mysticism which is orthodox and moral need not necessarily be genuine, though that which is heretical and immoral must necessarily be spurious; and in the large number of cases of the former kind no authoritative pronouncement has been made or appears to be possible. But in such cases there is little practical need for authority; a doubtfully genuine mystic may be accepted or rejected by individual opinion, and so long as his faith and morals are beyond question, neither acceptance nor rejection can do any harm. It may also be suggested that the difficulty of a decision may be considerably increased by the occurrence of abnormal states of different kinds in the experience of the same individual. The passage from real mystical

experiences to spurious ones seems to be far from an improbable occurrence—and the converse process, though doubtless less probable, can hardly be considered impossible, though nothing could well be more difficult than to trace such a transition. But the opinion expressed of the Methodists by William Law is applicable to a large class of mystical pretensions — "I think that they have the Spirit of God, but they have greatly mingled their own spirit with it."[1]

[1] The probable function of the "subliminal" consciousness and the nature of the union involved in the *lumen gloirae* are well though briefly described by Dr Chandler (Anglican Bishop of Bloemfontein); though it is, of course, incorrect to speak, as he does, of the "spark of the divine nature which is present in us from the beginning, and which makes us spiritual creatures with an organ of spiritual intuition"—*Ara Cœli*, pp. 115-119.

CHAPTER VI

EVIL

THE question, often felt to be a very distressing one, of the cause and inner nature of evil and of its place in the universal scheme of things, has a special affinity with the principle of mysticism. It would seem only natural to suppose that those who are admitted to the special divine intimacy which is the privilege of mystics should have something to say about the way in which the unsatisfactory condition of this world is to be reconciled with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent Creator, of whose nature they have a deeper knowledge than others, and of whose relation to a suffering creation they may therefore be expected to have a fuller comprehension than the rest of mankind.

This expectation is one that is often considered to be unfulfilled; though mystical writers do as a rule deal more or less fully with the subject, their account is often thought to be inadequate, and even unmeaning. They are agreed that evil—whether considered as sin or as the suffering consequent upon it—has no substantive existence; it is the negation of good and no more. There can be no *Summum Malum*, St Thomas declares, for this reason. As to how evil comes into being, and what is its place and meaning in a universe that must be considered wholly good, they are by no means explicit. They know—but they cannot explain how they know—that evil has no permanence and no substantial reality: that it neither mars the perfect goodness and omnipotence of God, nor troubles the peace of those who are united with Him—that in the end all will somehow be perfectly well.[1] This no doubt is quite satisfactory to

[1] *Cf.* Blessed Angela of Foligno. "I felt myself in such fulness of charity, and I understood with such joy in that power and will and justice of God, that I understood not only those things about which I had asked, but I was satisfied as to the salvation offered to every creature, and about the devil and the

the mystic who receives the supernatural assurance; but it is hardly applicable by way of argument or explanation to the perplexities of others in this matter.

Nevertheless, it is quite possible to construct a theodicy, or vindication of the divine justice, upon the basis of the principle which lies at the root of supernatural mysticism. Indeed it is scarcely possible to do so in any other way. That principle, as we have seen, is the absoluteness, or the infinite perfection and independence, of the divine nature. All

damned and all things. But all this I cannot explain in words." (In *Catholic Mysticism*, by A. Thorold.)

Cf. also Julian of Norwich, ch. xxxii. "One point of our Faith is, that many creatures shall be damned as the angels which be now fiends, and many in earth that died out of the faith of Holy Church, and also many that hath received Christendom, and liveth unchristian lives, and so die out of charity. All these shall be damned to Hell without end, as Holy Church teacheth me to believe; and standing all this, methought it was impossible that all manner of thing should be well, as our Lord shewed in this time. And as to this, I had no other answer but this: 'That, that is impossible to thee, is not impossible to me; I shall save my word in all things and I shall make all things well—for this is the great deed that our Lord God shall do; in which deed He shall save His word in all things, and He shall make well all that is not well. But what the deed shall be and how it shall be done, there is no creature beneath Christ that knoweth it, nor shall know it till it be done.'"

depends on God, but He Himself on nothing but Himself. Consequently, His motive in creating is in Himself—His own "glory" or "pleasure"; and this is the only absolutely good motive which can be conceived for any action on the part of either the Creator or the creature. But if God is "glorified" by the creation of this world; if His power and justice are manifested in the reward of the good and the punishment of the wicked; then certainly the act of creation is good, its motive is fulfilled. Evil is the work of the creature, not of the Creator, whose justice and mercy alike it is the means of exhibiting.

Further, the goodness of the act of creation is not vitiated by the fact that it involves the self-caused misery, temporal or eternal, of the human race. At first sight this does appear to be a grave difficulty, in the way of reconciling omnipotence with perfect goodness; for, it is asked, if God could create a world in which no evil could exist, or could even abstain from creating this one, why did He not do so? Or if He could not do either, how can He be omnipotent? But evil is the

work of created free-will, not of God: if, therefore, God had abstained from the creation of this world (or what is the same thing, had made it different) because of man's actions foreseen either as possible or as certain, then God would not have acted as God, but in contravention of His very nature. There would have been a corner of the possible universe from which He would have been excluded, a good act which He might not do: He would have been limited by and dependent on the free actions of His possible creatures. But such an idea is absolutely inconceivable: God cannot at the same time be perfect and limited, or dependent and independent, or supreme and subject to the will of His creatures; and if He could act in subordination to anything external to Himself, He would no longer exist—He would have destroyed Himself. To remove the centre of a circle is to destroy both centre and circle, and if God were not the centre of the circle of the universe, neither He nor it could exist.

Thus the difficulty of reconciling the existence of evil with the omnipotence and good-

ness of a divine creator disappears as soon as the essential nature of God is realised in respect of its independence and supremacy. Hence also appears the negative character of evil, which is recognised by all systems of thought that admit a supreme being—by the Stoic Cleanthes and the Neoplatonist Plotinus no less than by St Augustine and St Thomas. Evil is the absence of certain possible or ideal elements in certain parts of creation, not the existence in them of something hostile or extraneous. Sin is the perversion of the free-will, not its inhibition; pain is the disorder of the organism or the faculties, not a fresh element in their constitution; suffering, whether mental or bodily, is a mode of natural self-consciousness, not consciousness of a different kind from that which experiences pleasure. Moreover, if evil in the ordinary (not the "metaphysical") sense is held to be identical with sin and its consequences—as it must be on Christian principles—then sin and suffering are two mutually counterbalancing factors in the harmonious interaction of all the elements of the universe;

evil is an accident of that which is specifically good; it is provided for in the universal scheme of things, as the expansion and contraction of the main-spring is provided for in the mechanism of a watch—it is an irregularity of detail which subserves the regularity of the whole.

The only alternatives to this view are either an impossible Manichean dualism, or some form of philosophical pessimism, such as the original underlying principle of Buddhism, or those which are adopted respectively by Schopenhauer and Hartmann, or such as is really latent, though not acknowledged, in the "substance" of Spinozism or the idealistic absolute of Bradley. The subordinate dualism of Christianity relieves the Creator of what may be called responsibility for evil, while its fundamental monism provides a place for evil in the scheme of things no less secure than that which it finds in the supposed universal substance or the absolute.

As a philosophical statement of the Christian view of evil this can hardly be unacceptable to any one. But it must be admitted that

it fails to go to the root of the matter, even when combined, as it should be, with the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement as constituting a manifestation of divine mercy superimposed upon that of the divine justice which appears in the natural universe. No merely speculative account of evil can be entirely satisfactory, even apart from the necessary incompleteness of any speculation on so purely transcendental a subject, so long as evil is not merely known, but felt. What gives this problem its peculiar poignancy is the fact that evil is primarily a matter of experience; it is but cold comfort for those who suffer to know that their pains do not disturb the harmony of the universe or disprove the goodness of its Creator. "There never yet was a philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently," and it seems improbable that any rational explanation of the origin and nature of evil, however unexceptionable on philosophical or theological grounds, will ever subdue the human instinct of rebellion against the prevailing law of suffering.

But mysticism stands on a different plane

from that of philosophy or speculative theology; it is an experience as direct and as real as even the most entirely corporal forms of suffering, and it is consequently able to provide a real counterpoise to all pains of mind or body far different from the somewhat empty consolations of philosophy, or even from those of the deepest human sympathy; with which latter it has nevertheless something in common. It is probably, indeed, in genuine human sympathy that the only real consolation — inadequate enough — for unavoidable suffering is to be found by natural means; it does not indeed diminish or shorten the pain, but a kind of set-off is provided by the regard and affection which the sympathy implies. There is no consolation, but rather the reverse, in an enemy's sympathy; but the joy of friendship manifested in sympathy is felt to be a distinct gain due to the suffering which has given it occasion. In somewhat the same way, though in an infinitely higher degree, the joy of union with God is a consolation which mystics consider to be cheaply bought at the price

of any pain. Argument and explanation become, as compared with such delights as the mystic knows, of very minor importance; the "familiar friendship" of God is a practical argument, more persuasive than any other could possibly be, for His absolute goodness and infinite power, no matter what difficulties may be found in the way of reconciling them with earthly appearances within the narrow range of human thought and knowledge.

This eminently practical solution of the problem of evil is implicitly contained in what has been called the "mystical paradox." Mystics constantly assert that it would be better to be united to God in hell, than to be separated from Him in heaven.[1] Either

[1] *E.g.*, St Teresa: "A soul is suffering sorrow and disquiet, the mind is darkened and dry, but is set at peace, freed from all trouble and filled with light, merely by hearing the words, 'Be not troubled.' These deliver it from all pain, although before, if the whole world and all its learned men had united to persuade it there was no cause for grief, it could not, in spite of their efforts, have got rid of its sadness." (Castle, vi. 3.) "Souls that have reached the state I speak of . . . care nothing for their own pain or glory; if they are anxious not to stay long in purgatory, it is more on account of its keeping them from the presence of God than because of its torments." (*Ib.* vi. 7.)

B. Angela of Foligno (*loc. cit.*): "If I knew for certain that I was damned, I could not possibly grieve nor labour less, nor

is, of course, actually simply inconceivable; the paradox is merely a strong assertion of the absolute dependence of the creature upon the will of the Creator, and the entire contentment which a soul that has once realised that dependence must feel in occupying its divinely ordained place in the universe, whatever it may be.

The point of view is shifted: the universe is envisaged from its true centre, which is God, not from the false and imaginary centre of self. A faint likeness to this conception may be perceived in the "contemplation of the kernel of things" extolled by Schopenhauer; in Hartmann's doctrine that the "ends of the unconscious" should be made our own, and in the notion advocated by Comte and by the "ethical religions" of the present day,

be less zealous in prayer for the honour of God, so perfectly did I understand His justice."

Ruysbroeck: "Lord, I am Thine, I should be Thine as gladly in Hell as in Heaven, if in that way I could advance Thy glory." —*Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage.*

B. Margaret Mary Alacoque: "Je ne sais si je me trompe, mais il me semble que je voudrais aimer mon amour crucifié d'un amour aussi ardent que celui des Séraphins, mais je ne serais pas fâchée que ce fût dans l'enfer que je l'aimasse de la sorte."—*Vie par ses Contemporaines.*

that life is to be viewed and transacted from the standpoint of humanity, or of posterity. The idea, thus stripped of its personal aspect, becomes utterly unreal and ineffective; but in the mystical consciousness it furnishes the only antidote ever yet discovered (and that, it would seem, a complete one) to the bitter sense of wrong and injustice which the evils of life are apt to engender. To regard the world and oneself from the point of view of the whole human race, so as to act altruistically for the benefit of others, or to expend devotion on the idea of duty is one thing; to be so united with God that the thought of self is lost and forgotten is quite another. One is an artificial pose in regard to bloodless abstractions which have no vitality; the other is the actual grasp of the very root and vital principle of things.

Thus the mystic translates into real and living experience the theoretical principle adduced by Christian philosophy as the explanation of the existence and nature of evil, and furnishes what for practical purposes may fairly be called an experimental test of its validity.

On the other hand, the mystical attitude towards evil is strongly corroborated by its exact and obviously unpremeditated agreement with the only metaphysical theory which provides anything like an adequate account of the origin and nature of evil.

It may be noted finally, that the consolations of mysticism in this matter are by no means to be confined strictly to mystics. In the first place, the blind trust in the divine goodness, which is probably for many the only practical resource in the pains and anxieties of life, loses altogether its *prima facie* appearance of unreasonableness when it is founded on real, even though vicarious experience. The logical position of the Christian who believes in the goodness and omnipotence of God, in spite of appearances to the contrary, merely because he would otherwise be unable to believe in God at all, certainly leaves much to be desired. But if it is reinforced by the consideration that those who know Him best have found, by direct experience which cannot be gainsaid, that He is both omnipotent and good, the position is really

no less reasonable than that of those who are convinced of the insularity of Great Britain without having personally circumnavigated it.

Secondly, the mystical attitude towards the problem is quite consistent with the absence in any particular individual of mystical experience properly so called. There are doubtless innumerable Christians whose conviction of the power and goodness of God is not less in degree than that of the mystic, though their conviction is founded on theoretical rather than directly experimental grounds. The certainty of faith, supported as it nearly always is by a strong sense of the care and protection of divine Providence, and by the experience of favours granted in answer to prayer, is in no way less strong—in some respects it is even stronger, than that which is based directly on mystical knowledge.

But even in this case the mystical experience of others, whether recorded in Holy Scripture or in the lives of the Saints, or by living contemporaries, provides an aid to faith, or "motive of credibility" which cannot rightly be overlooked.

CHAPTER VII

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

THE supernatural character of mysticism depends upon the double aspect in which God's presence in creation may be considered. In one point of view God is everywhere present in creation, and thus may be approached by all men, even while they are confined physically to the material sphere of the senses. There is between God and His creatures no local interval, and no intelligible intermediation such as the Gnostics conceived to exist. The world is not revolving apart from God, forgotten and neglected; nor is it brought into relation with Him only through a hierarchy or chain of subordinate spiritual existences or emanations. God is rightly, in this sense, said to be "immanent" in the world as the constant efficient cause from which everything

in every moment of existence derives its being; as the supreme ruler of all that is; and as the intelligent designer of all forms of being, together with all their permutations and combinations. He is everywhere *per essentiam presentiam et potentiam.*[1] On the other hand, God is by nature absolutely distinct and separate from all created existence, not merely in the way in which one created being may differ in kind from another, but by the unique nature of His being, which is absolute and self-dependent, and thus altogether incommensurable with created things, which are necessarily dependent and derived. Though all creatures are in the similitude of God by virtue of the being which is communicated to them by Him, they are all absolutely unlike Him in His independence; no imaginable greatness or perfection in any creature can give it any sort of resemblance to this essential and fundamental attribute of the divine nature. Therefore God can only be known by intellectual separation

[1] *Summa*, I. viii. 3, and *cf.* St John of the Cross, *Ascent*, ii. 5, and *Spiritual Canticle*, xi. 2.

from all creatures: He cannot be expressed in terms of anything but Himself, or brought under any category which has any other content—there is no "formula" for God, no class to which He may be said to belong.

If God is considered as intelligent, wise, beautiful or powerful, He is still none of those things in the same sense in which they can be predicated of creatures, who can only be intelligent, wise or beautiful by participation, as their very existence is only participation in the being of God. The speculative knowledge that God exists is the recognition, theoretically, of a unique kind of being; but the experimental knowledge, which is mysticism, is immediate experience or apprehension of that which is essentially different from all else, and must therefore be apprehended or experienced after a wholly different manner from that in which we experience created existence. That is to say that God is transcendent; and it is only in a sense consistent with His transcendence that He can truly be said to be immanent in creation.

There are two other senses in which God

has been held to be immanent: one of them the conception of Spinoza, the other of Eckhart and Hegel. The former holds that God and nature, or spirit and matter, are identical—the same thing, namely "substance," in two different aspects. This notion is immanence in its strictly etymological sense; God is in nature and remains in it; He cannot be outside it, for there is no outside; and He cannot be distinct from it, for He is constituted by the sum total of its parts and their relations, of which He is in fact the underlying unity and reality. Much the same relation to the world of phenomena is attributed by Bradley to the absolute.

The other view regards nature as a mode of God's being, a necessary phase or moment in His self-realisation. Nature is identical with God, but God is more than nature (not quantitatively but intensively), inasmuch He is both prior and posterior to nature, in the order of thought, though not necessarily in the order of time. This, however, is not really transcendence; for God in this view is ontologically one with nature, so far as it

goes; creation is a necessary part of God, and He transcends nature only in the sense of being more than, not different from nature.

Under either of these two conceptions God is "given" in nature, and experience of nature is experience of God. There is no place therefore for vision, "rapture" or "ecstasy," the object of which would be merely the non-existent. All the mystic could do would be to reflect upon his sensible experience, and compound a syncretised Deity of the "threads and patches" of individual sensation, thought and feeling.

It is a very different process that the supernatural mystic expounds, so far as the limitations of human language will allow him. God is substantially or essentially present in the soul, as He is in all created things; but the mystic does far more than merely reflect on this truth. What he seeks is the supernatural union of likeness, begotten by love, which is the union of the human will with the divine. He seeks to realise the unfelt natural presence of God in creation, not by resting in any aspect of nature, even its most

abstract one, as mere being, but by entering into a personal relationship with the concealed presence which is the source of being. Whereas Spinoza saw *natura naturans* in *natura naturata*, and Hegel pure being evolving itself through the maze of the becoming, the supernatural mystic cuts himself loose at one blow from all phenomenal entanglements, and "passes free and untrammelled by all that is seen and all that sees" into the "intangible and invisible" presence of Him who is "beyond all things."[1] This appears to be the true interpretation of the doctrine of the "ground" (Grund) of the soul, which is prominent in the German mysticism of the fourteenth century, and to which reference has already been made. This doctrine, as it appears in Eckhart, Tauler and Ruysbroeck, and the *German Theology*, is somewhat confused, and has led to some apparent misunderstanding.[2] There are two

[1] *See* Dion., *Myst. Theol.*, c. 1.

[2] *E.g.*, Tauler (*Sermon of St John Baptist*): "There is no past or present here; and no created light can reach or shine into this divine ground; for here only is the dwelling-place of God and His sanctuary. This divine abyss can be fathomed by no creatures; it can be filled by none and it satisfies none; God

"grounds," spoken of respectively as "created" and "uncreated," and the two seem to be treated as almost interchangeable — whence these writers seem occasionally to speak of the essence or substance of the soul as if it were uncreated, and a part of the divine essence. But the general principles of at least Tauler and Ruysbroeck certainly require us to understand the created ground to be the substance of the human soul, as distinguished from its faculties—the principle in virtue of which it not merely acts, but is; and the uncreated ground is then to be understood as that substantial or "immanent" presence of God which is to be found in all created things alike, as the background and support without which they could have no existence at all. The close contact (as for want of a better word it must be called) between the two is obvious. The created ground is the essence of the soul, a thing which cannot be directly known, but only inferred from its

only can fill it in His infinity. For this abyss belongs only to the divine abyss, of which it is written 'Abyssus abyssum invocat.'" And compare the *German Theology*, ch. i.: "He is the substance of all things."

operations, a purely spiritual and intelligible entity, removed from all direct experience; and the uncreated ground is another purely spiritual entity, also incapable of being naturally experienced, which is the basis of the created ground's existence — the ground of the ground, in fact. But when the mystical union of the soul with God takes place, the two grounds become in a certain sense one. God is realised as the foundation of the soul's being, and the soul's perception of its own essence is, in fact, the perception of its unity with the essential divine nature. Eckhart seems, at times, to have identified the two grounds in an ontological and not merely mystical unity; and the others, in the fervour of devotional experience, as was perhaps natural, have not always kept the distinction perfectly clear. But their view is, on the whole, intelligible enough, and far removed from any affinity with pantheism. But the struggle with the sense-implications of language perpetually besets mystical writers, and never ceases to involve their meaning in obscurity. The ordinary processes of the mind can be

expressed in words only by way of metaphor, and the meaning of the language of psychology is not always to be easily apprehended. Much more must the application of language to that which is beyond thought, and in some sense its negation, be difficult and liable to misunderstanding.

It will be clear enough, however, from what has been said that the terms "immanent" and "transcendent," as applied to the divine nature, are not mutually exclusive, but indicate merely two aspects of the same thing. The transcendence of God is immanent, and His immanence is transcendent. By immanence is to be understood the divine accessibility to the human soul, and by transcendence the essential independence of the divine nature of all created things and persons. The words, if used rightly, must be used in the Kantian or subjective sense of two ways in which God may be apprehended by us, not as indicating two modes of His existence. God may be known to exist, and His nature partially understood, by the Baconian "interrogation" of His handiwork; thus our knowledge of God

through nature is an immanent knowledge. But the conception of God so arrived at is of a being who wholly transcends nature, and whose essential distinctness from all that is not eternally Himself is a fundamental attribute of His being. Thus our knowledge of God is transcendent as well as immanent, since while we conceive Him as manifested by nature, we conceive Him also, and in the same act, as essentially distinct and separate from nature. This, however, is not the same thing as saying that God *is* in nature and also beyond it, but the exact contrary; God has neither two modes of being nor two modes of action; He is *totum inter omnia, et totum extra* — His action, like His existence, is either wholly immanent or wholly transcendent, according to the point of view adopted. To contrast the two, in an ontological sense, is really to make a cross-division—as if we were to contrast His omnipotence with His power to create a universe. It is not to be wondered at that a fancied distinction between God's immanental and transcendental actions should have led to strange results.

CHAPTER VIII

PLOTINUS

THE experimental knowledge of God by means of special divine illumination must, according to the view we are advocating, be considered to be the prerogative of Christianity. For since the fulness of divine knowledge, so far as it is attainable by human beings in this life, is to be found in the Christian religion alone, it is evidently inconceivable that such knowledge should either fail to be found there in its highest form, which is mysticism, or that it should exist elsewhere in equal perfection. This view is, for the most part, fully borne out by a comparison of Christian mysticism with such few instances of non-Christian religious experience as may by any straining of the epithet be called mystical. So also the mystical pretensions of persons outside the

pale of the Catholic Church, and those which, though made on the behalf of Catholics, the Church holds to be spurious, are manifestly untenable on the principles laid down by Catholic authority as to the necessary character and results of true mysticism.

There is, however, one case which it is difficult not to regard as an exception to this rule — that of Plotinus. This remarkable figure stands out as the sole instance in which all the conditions of true mysticism (with the necessary exception of faith) seem to have been fulfilled by one who was neither a Catholic nor a Christian, but the father of Neoplatonism, in its later and fully-developed form. Plotinus was born about the year 204, and studied at Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas, but at the age of forty went to Rome, where he taught until the last year of his life, the Emperor Gallienus being one of his disciples, and died in Campania in the year 269. He was much sought after in Rome as a kind of spiritual director; his habits of life were ascetic, as indeed would naturally be the case with one who so despised material

things as to be "like one who was ashamed of being in the body, and therefore could not bear to speak of his birth, or parents or country."[1]

His philosophy insists strongly on the transcendence of God, the supreme unity and absolute Good, which is above all being and all thought. Beneath the One are intelligence (*νοῦς*), with which the Platonic ideas are identified, and the soul (*ψυχή*), which is the product of intelligence, and in its turn produces corporeal things by impressing form upon indeterminate, unqualified matter. Thus the body is in the soul, rather than the soul in the body; all things are held together by the One, which continually draws the manifold to itself. Man's part is to rise up from the diversity and degradation of matter, through thought, into union with the one and absolute Good. We are not, however, now concerned with Plotinus's philosophy, but with its practical consequence. It is in the final stage of the soul's upward course, its union with God and

[1] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*.

rest in Him, that the system of Plotinus becomes purely mystical.

The nature of this union is described in the sixth Ennead. Like Dionysius after him Plotinus does not bring out very clearly the notion of special supernatural assistance, or grace, as a necessary condition of mystical vision. But, also like Dionysius, he insists strongly on the distinction between mystics and the uninitiated (*μὴ μεμυήμενοι*, compare Dion., *Myst. Theol.*, 1); and he speaks, as Dionysius does not, of the "call" and "drawing" of the supreme Good, whereby the soul is brought into union with it.[1] This union with God, or vision of Him, takes place in the "substance of the soul"; it is rather contact than mere knowledge, though knowledge is a necessary preliminary to it. It is ecstasy, unity, the projection of the soul out of itself,[2] in virtue of the affinity which

[1] *ἐκεῖνο δὴ ὃ ψυχὴ διώκει καὶ ὃ φῶς νῷ παρέχει καὶ ἐμπεσὸν αὐτοῦ ἴχνος κινεῖ, οὕτοι δεῖ θαυμάζειν εἰ τοιαύτην δύναμιν ἔχει ἕλκον πρὸς αὑτὸ καὶ ἀνακαλούμενον ἐκ πάσης πλάνης, ἵνα πρὸς αὐτὸ ἀναπαύσαιτο.*—Enn. vi. 7.

[2] *οὐ θέαμα, ἀλλὰ ἄλλος τρόπος τοῦ ἰδεῖν, ἔκστασις καὶ ἄπλωσις καὶ ἐπίδοσις αὐτοῦ καὶ ἕφεσις πρὸς ἀφὴν . . . μηδὲ κατ' ἐπιστήμην ἡ σύνεσις ἐκείνου μηδὲ κατὰ νόησιν, ὥσπερ τὰ ἄλλα νοητά, ἀλλὰ κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα.*—*Ib.* 9.

the soul has to the One by its own unity, as a self-centred monad (*τὸ ψυχῆς οἷον κέντρον*). Like Dionysius again, Plotinus enlarges on the abstraction from all that is manifold which is needful before union with the One can be attained. The soul in that union despises even thought, which previously had been its delight (*διάκειται τότε ὡς καὶ τὸν νοεῖν καταφρονεῖν, ὅ τὸν ἄλλον χρόνον ἠσπάζετο*); much more all material things: for there is movement, or unrest even in thought, whereas the one is unmoved, so that the soul that abides in the one finds absolute rest, and abandons all things. It is as if one entered a splendid mansion and admired the beauty of its adornment; but when the master of the house appears, one cannot but forget all those objects of admiration in the joy of seeing Him, who comes under no similitude of Himself, but as the object of true vision. For this Master of the house is no man, but God; and makes Himself known not by means of common sight, but as filling the soul which beholds Him. Again, it is not beautiful things that the soul beholds in this vision, nor beauty itself, nor

the whole band (*χορὸν*) of virtues; as if one entered the vestibule of a temple, and saw there the statues and similitudes of the God, but afterwards going within the sanctuary, saw no more any statue or picture, but the divine being Himself. This union between the soul and God resembles in its clearness the union of earthly lovers (*ἐραστὰι κὰι ἐρώμενοι συγκρῖναι θέλοντες*); the soul will have no other thing, good or bad; but itself alone will enjoy Him alone (*ἵνα δέξηται μόνη μόνον*).

Thus we find in Plotinus the most advanced conceptions of the great Christian mystics. There is no vision or locution; all is abstract or purely spiritual. But Plotinus tells us almost in identical phraseology of the Mansions of St Teresa,[1] of the prayer of quiet, of St John's dark night of faith, and of the spiritual marriage; the "ground" (*κέντρον*) of the soul is with him as familiar and as necessary an idea as it is with the German mystics.

Quotations might be multiplied and coin-

[1] "Ne croirait-on pas entendre encore Plotin, quand la sainte fille (St Teresa) nous recommande 'de porter les yeux vers le centre qui est le palais où habite ce grand roi?'"—St Hilaire, *L'Ecole d'Alexandrie.*

cidences noted to almost any extent. But what has been said will be enough to show the character of Plotinus's mysticism and its marvellous agreement with the true supernatural type. The question therefore arises whether we are to consider Plotinus a genuine supernatural mystic or not; and if he must be held to be so, we are immediately confronted with the further question of his true relation to Christian mysticism. For unless all supernatural mystics, Christian and Neoplatonist alike, are subject to a common delusion, it would seem difficult to assign the same origin to the mystical experience depicted by Plotinus as to the "mystical theology" of Dionysius, or of St Teresa and St John of the Cross.

It must be remembered that Plotinus was, during the most important part of his career, in close contact with Christianity, and that not in any outlying region of the faith, where distinctions of creed might be obscured in the minds of an unlettered people, but in Rome itself. Moreover, during his residence at Rome he must have witnessed the pro-

scription and persecution of Christians under Decius, and the admission of Christianity to the privileges of a *religio licita* by his pupil Gallienus. He can, therefore, have been ignorant neither of the exclusiveness of the Christian religion, nor of the influence it was able to exert over both those within and those without its pale. He seems, in point of fact, to have disregarded Christianity altogether; he was neither a convert, like Victorinus a century after him, nor an opponent, like his disciple Porphyry. Yet he must have in some fashion deliberately rejected Christianity; it cannot have escaped his notice. But the reason why such an *anima naturaliter Christiana* should have resisted the attraction of a faith which had so much in common with his own system cannot even be conjectured.

We can only choose between two theories of the cause of his affinity to the mystical theologians of the Church. The first would represent him as affected by the deliberate approximation to Christianity which the later Neoplatonism undoubtedly exhibited, and which we can hardly be mistaken in regarding as a

desperate effort on the part of Paganism to fight the growing power of the Church on its own ground with its own weapons. To this cause are attributed the quasi-Trinitarian doctrine of Neoplatonism, the revival of Mithraism, and the life of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus.[1] It may well have been the case that it seemed advisable to meet the widespread mysticism of the early Church—naïve and simple-minded as it often was, as, for example, in the visions of Hermas —with a theory not less mystical but founded on what professed to be a higher Gnosis. Plotinus, indeed, has none of the characteristics of a merely speculative theorist; his work bears all the signs of personal experience, and Porphyry tells us that four times during his six years' association with Plotinus his master attained to the state of mystical union.

It is scarcely possible to attribute conscious insincerity to a character so striking and majestic as that of Plotinus: the spirit of his writings is of itself almost sufficient to clear him

[1] *See* Bigg, *Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, Lect. VII.

of any suspicion of mere vulgar charlatanism. But it is not actually impossible that his mystical experience may have been of the natural order, and due not to any supernatural illumination, but by way of automatic suggestion, to the direct tendency of the philosophical system in which he was absorbed. It may have been no more than a strong emotional realisation of intellectual principles obtained by remarkable philosophical acumen. Certainly one may notice — apart from the quietism suggested by some passages — an element of mere negative abstraction in his system, which is indeed necessitated by the highly abstract and practically impersonal nature which he attributes to the One, but which makes a very marked contrast with the warmth of personal relationship—the *familiaris amicitia Jesu* which one finds in Christian mysticism.[1]

[1] The distinction made by St Hilaire (*op. cit.*) is only verbal, and might with equal truth be reversed. "Les mystiques chrétiens diffèrent de Plotin en ce que soutenus par la foi, pour la plupart du moins, ils n'ont trouve dans l'extase que l'union mentale et spirituale avec Dieu, tandis que Plotin y a trouvé Dieu même. L'âme de sainte Therese se marie a Dieu, comme celle de saint François de Sales de Gerson et des autres ; l'âme de Plotin se transforme en Dieu, ou plutôt elle est Dieu."

As has been already remarked, the theory now popular of automatism furnishes a much needed explanation of the close resemblance borne to supernatural mysticism by the various kinds of mysticism which, on Christian principles, cannot be accepted as supernatural in any other sense than that of a possible connection with diabolical agency.

There is nothing to prevent us from holding this theory about the mysticism of Plotinus; but it must be admitted that the direct evidence for it is of the scantiest possible description.

The alternative is to accept the experience of Plotinus as one of those manifestations of divine grace outside its regular channels, the occurrence of which has from time to time been quite unmistakable. The number of instances has never been large enough to entitle them to be considered anything but exceptions to the prevailing rule; and the Church has never felt it her business to pronounce judgment upon the spiritual state of individuals outside her boundaries, strictly as she is compelled to reject as false all

doctrines contrary to her own. But the principle that "he that is not against us is for us" may perhaps be applied here; and if so, we may consider Plotinus as an involuntary witness to the truth of the Christian view of mysticism, and the reality of the experience of Christian mystics. Why, if this is the case, Plotinus (and possibly Porphyry as well) should have been favoured with special divine illumination it is, of course, impossible to say. We have no data that could be of any service to us in an attempt to assign a reason for such an exceptional dispensation of divine Providence. But it must be remembered that mystical experience is not of itself an evidence of sanctity, still less of final perseverance. It is possible to suppose that an individual may have been favoured with the grace of mystical knowledge for the purpose of his conversion, and may have failed to correspond with the divine intention; as the Magi might, if they had chosen, have failed to follow the guidance of the star.[1]

[1] This seems to have been St Augustine's view of Neoplatonism, and especially of Plotinus, whom he calls "magnus ille Platonicus." "Si Platonici, vel quicunque alii ista

Whatever explanation we adopt, the fact is that the system of Plotinus, on its mystical side, is practically identical with that of Dionysius and of all Christian mystics, though it has nothing whatever of all that gives Christianity its power to attract or influence or console.[1]

senserunt, cognoscentes Deum, sicut Deum glorificarent, et gratias agerent, nec evanescerent in cogitationibus suis, nec populorum erroribus partim auctores fierent, partim resistere non auderent, profecto confiterentur et illis immortalibus ac beatis, et nobis mortalibus ac miseris, ut immortales ac beati esse possimus, unum Deum deorum colendum, qui et noster est et illorum."—*Civ. Dei.* x. 3.

[1] Quod enim ante omnia tempora, et super omnia tempora incommunicabiliter manet unigenitus Filius tuus coaeternus tibi, et quia de plenitudine ejus accipiunt animae ut beatae sint, et quia participatione manentis in se renovantur ut sapientes sint ; est ibi ; quod autem secundum tempus pro impiis mortuus est—non est ibi. St Aug., Conf. vii. ix.

CHAPTER IX

HERETICAL MYSTICS

If Plotinus furnishes a solitary, or almost solitary instance of a system which, starting from false or inadequate principles, arrives at a method of mystical contemplation scarcely to be distinguished from genuine mysticism, the historical cases of an apparently converse process are too numerous to count. The names of those who, beginning as more or less orthodox Christians, have ended as extravagant visionaries, or as maintainers of principles opposed, not merely to Catholic orthodoxy, but even to all sane, human convictions, are freely scattered over the pages of history. True mysticism has undoubtedly been gravely prejudiced by the existence, frequently side by side with it, of extravagances

which claimed an equal and apparently identical authority with that of true mysticism. There are, nevertheless, very real and clearly marked distinctions between the two, and there is really no reason whatever for the common condemnation in which sometimes both are hastily included.

The external or "pragmatic" test is easy of application to all such cases in two ways. First, it is obvious that, from the Catholic point of view at least, tenets which directly contradict the rule of faith cannot have a divine origin, or be in any sense true. Secondly, as has been already remarked, it is incredible that a fresh revelation should be given with the divine purpose of superseding that which was once for all delivered to the saints; or, even if it could be granted that such a fresh revelation were conceivable, that it should be given in a less public and tangible fashion, and be of less universal application, than that which it endeavours to supplant. Theosophy is not theology, either mystical or speculative, but the degenerate offspring of a false theory of mysticism; and its

method is nothing but a corrupting influence, both in theology and in philosophy. Its philosophical tendency is apparent in the transcendentalism alike of Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and of Schopenhauer and Hartmann,[1] who practically agree in taking crude emotional data as the basis of a rational explanation of things. The "categorical imperative," the "Indifferenzpunkt," "self-objectivisation" — no less than the Will and the Unconscious, are instances of the *a priori* idealism from which such Neoplatonists as Plotinus and Proclus were entirely free. In theology there is scarcely any aberration of human credulity, or extravagance of human fantasy, that is not directly attributable to the same source. Montanus, Priscillian and the Fraticelli, Luther, Calvin and George Fox, Boehme, Swedenborg and Irving, unlike as they are to one another in many respects, agree in founding themselves on unreasoned, and generally irrational intuitions. Mysticism, in

[1] *Cf.* Hartmann, "Philosophy of the Unconscious" (*The Unc. in the Human Mind*, ch. ix.).

the Catholic view, cannot but be discredited whenever it enters into competition with the *magisterium* of the Church — whenever it leaves its true sphere of the personal and experimental, and becomes dogmatic and didactic.

But one naturally looks further for some intrinsic distinction which may differentiate spurious from true mysticism; one wishes to judge of its character, not merely by the practical test of its fruits, but by the nature of its principles, considered in themselves and apart from all consequences or relations with particular philosophical or theological doctrines. Such a distinction is readily to be found in the essential features of true mysticism, which we have seen to be of such a nature as to be incapable of presentation in the form of abstract doctrine. The essence of mysticism is, as we have seen, the actual experimental vision or knowledge of God, and in itself is necessarily ineffable and indescribable; it may be either real, or imaginary and delusive, but it cannot be either true or false, in the sense in which a doctrine must

be one or the other. It is, of course, quite conceivable that a doctrine or a matter of fact may be revealed in mystical vision; but the doctrine or fact is not, and cannot be, mystical, simply because it belongs not to the mystical or supernatural sphere, but to that of the sensible and intelligible world. A false doctrine or statement for which mystical authority is claimed may be either a real divine communication, misunderstood and misreported, or a deduction from a true mystical experience, or a mere delusion of the senses or the imagination. Any doctrine so put forward is open to criticism like any other statement, and cannot be accepted merely on the authority attributed to it by an individual who may possibly be the victim of his own imagination or misunderstanding. But it is evident that where the doctrine constitutes the whole of the experience, there is really no question at all of mysticism. The intelligence of the person to whom the doctrine is supposed to be made known may have led him to discover a truth, or the reverse; he may or may not

have been under the guidance of divine grace in conceiving it; but there is no ground whatever for supposing such a person to have received a genuine mystical communication. Since, in such a case, the doctrine purports to be the bare description of the supposed mystical vision, it is by that very fact convicted of error; true mystical experience cannot be described or translated into terms of the non-mystical. Dionysius's paradoxical canon is here precisely in point—"If any one, seeing God, knows what he sees, it is by no means God that he sees, but something created and knowable."

A deduction, on the other hand, from a mystical experience, or series of experiences, may quite conceivably be a mistaken one, even though the experiences themselves may be real. There can be no reason for supposing that the favour of mystical vision implies any subsequent immunity from intellectual error—or, for that matter, from moral lapse. Neither Moses nor St Paul was, or supposed himself to be, so safeguarded by the mystical favours bestowed on him. St John

of the Cross insists at great length on the possibility of misunderstanding divine communications, as well as on the danger of mistaking for them those which come from another source, and concludes, as do all mystical writers, that much importance should not be attached to such experiences.[1]

Doctrines, then, which claim mystical authority, must be judged to be true or false according to the support they receive from the conclusions of reason or the truths of revelation; their claim to be in themselves mystical experiences is refuted by the fact that they are doctrines, or theories about God, whereas mysticism is concerned not with doctrines or theories—which belong to the domain, not of mystical, but of speculative theology—but solely with God Himself. The experience, of whatever kind, upon which such doctrines are founded, may or may not be genuinely mystical, and must be judged of apart from the doctrine for which its authority is claimed, according to its alleged character, and the condition of the person by whom it is under-

[1] *Ascent*, II. xviii. and xix.

gone. Thus visions experienced by persons in a state of alcoholism, nervous or brain disease, or artificially produced anæsthesia, are manifestly to be attributed to those agencies; visions or imaginations of the state of mankind or of particular individuals, or of the material universe, however vast, picturesque or symbolical they may be, are certainly not mystical, but are generally due to natural emotion, mental excitement, automatic suggestion, or some similar cause. Those only are to be considered even possibly mystical which include a direct consciousness of the divine presence, which are preceded by no emotion or excitement, which can be probably traced to no physical or mental cause, and which are not capable of being fully described in words.

We may illustrate the principles thus obtained by one or two of the best-known instances of spurious mysticism. We may take first the sect variously known as Christian Brethren, Beghards or Fraticelli, who flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and were condemned as heretics

at the Council of Vienne. They were said to be constantly subject to visions and ecstasies, and were accused (no doubt with some exaggeration, but probably not without grave cause) of immoral practices of the grossest kind. They were influenced, more or less directly, by the speculative pantheism of Amalric of Bena, and professed to regard matter as a secondary and comparatively unimportant aspect of spirit; so that when the spiritual aspect of the universe was truly apprehended, material things and conduct in regard to them became altogether indifferent. Such spiritual apprehension was held to be a natural process, and open to all human beings at will. One of the charges brought against this sect by Pope Clement V. at Vienne was that they held the Beatific vision to be attainable by the natural powers of mankind, without any need for the intervention of the *lumen gloriae*. They thus denied what we have seen to be a fundamental postulate of true mysticism; they were not really mystics, but imaginative or "temperamental" theosophists. Their so-

called mysticism was akin, on the one hand, to what some modern writers have called symbolism or "nature-mysticism," and on the other, to the humanism of the Renaissance, their practical view of life being pretty nearly identical with that of Lorenzo Valla's treatise on Pleasure. Visions and ecstasies allied with doctrines of this kind must obviously be taken as the consequence of such doctrines rather than as their cause, and can be considered only as a neuropathic form of sensuality, as far removed from true mysticism as anything could possibly be.

Of a very different character were the strange transcendental imaginations of the pious shoemaker, Jacob Boehme. His mind appears to have been constantly fixed on the idea of God; and by a purely natural process there arose in it, together with many sane and devout reflections, a kind of philosophical statement of the problems of existence, transferred in strange and bizarre phraseology to the divine nature. These ideas Boehme declared to be "opened" to him; they came, he could not say how, into his mind, and

had upon him the effect of a communication from an external source. But there is no need, indeed there is no possibility of accepting his explanation of their origin. A meditative and abstractive mind, without authoritative guidance or restraint, will naturally and almost inevitably find in the abstract idea of the divine nature a repetition of the influences it sees at work in the surrounding world. Thus the Abyss, the Potential Trinity, the relation of Being to Not-being, the Will, the Imagination, the Maiden Idea and the moving Fire, and the like, are undoubtedly no more than the pseudo-philosophical forms under which Boehme conceived and contemplated the universe, and which rose by some process of auto-suggestion into his consciousness as he contemplated the idea of God, and thus appeared to him in some sense identical with it. Boehme has affinities — as probably all naturally contemplative minds must have— with Gnosticism and Neoplatonism on the one hand, and on the other, with modern idealism—with Jacobi, Schelling and Hegel, and with Schopenhauer and Hartmann. But

with true mysticism he has none whatever; he may be thought to claim a revelation as the authority for his system, but to mystical theology — the experimental, ineffable knowledge of God—he makes no pretension.

The theosophy of Swedenborg may be classed with Boehme's, inasmuch as both pretend to direct knowledge of transcendental realities. But whereas Boehme, with all his strange terminology, is philosophical and intellectual, Swedenborg does no more than embody, in crude, allegorical form, certain phases of Protestant theology. His visions do, indeed, profess to be statements of fact, and not allegorical or imaginary—to be, in fact, a revelation. But even if this claim were admitted, if one could seriously accept, for example, the story of the angels' protracted attempts to convert Luther from his doctrine of justification, and their daily fluctuations of ill-success, we should still have nothing like a true mystical experience. The spiritual, ineffable divine presence has no place in Swedenborg's gallery, and indeed would be sadly incongruous there. Swedenborg's symbolical interpretation of

Scripture, elaborate and dogmatic in tone as it is, has really nothing to do with mystical theology properly so called.

Quietism has appeared to many writers to be a genuine example of mysticism: the doctrines of Molinos and Madame Guyon have been identified with those of St Teresa, and the condemnation of the former has been attributed to the recalcitrance of their authors against ecclesiastical authority, as contrasted with the docility of St Teresa and St John of the Cross. But the doctrine of "disinterested love," as interpreted by the Quietists, is quite a different thing from the mystical passivity of St Teresa, to which it has been likened. With her, as with other mystics, passivity consists in a concentration of the faculties upon God, not, indeed, always in successive "acts," but at least in one continuous act; whereas the Quietist would have the soul renounce its very personality and conscious existence, and that not merely during the condition of ecstatic contemplation, but as a permanent state. Madame Guyon is never tired of declaring that her

soul "has no inclination or tendency for anything whatsoever"; she is "in such an abandonment" that she is obliged to reflect in order to know "if she has a being and subsistence." "I have to make an effort to think if I am and what I am; if there are in God creatures and anything subsisting."

Whatever may be thought of the opinions or conduct of the opponents of Quietism, of Segneri, D'Estrées, Bossuet, La Chaise and De la Combe, it cannot be doubted that its distinctive doctrine, no less than the condemned propositions extracted from the *Guida Spirituale*, is contradictory, not only of divine revelation, but of the elementary facts of human nature. But it is in no sense mystical: it is a theory founded professedly on mystical experience, but it is not and cannot be the experience itself. Madame Guyon herself says of a mystical state which she declares herself to have experienced that it was "too simple, pure and naked for me to be able to speak of it. The most elevated dispositions are those of which one can say nothing." One is tempted to exclaim, *O si sic omnia!* But

the difference between mystical contemplation, and theories more or less directly founded upon it, could scarcely be better illustrated than by Madame Guyon's account of herself.

The question remains, are these professedly mystical experiences genuinely supernatural or not? On the whole, one is inclined to think that they may be. They seem to have had no emotional state immediately preceding them; they are apparently indescribable and unsought; they produce subjective conviction of a direct divine influence; and they do not appear to have any real tendency to suggest the false or questionable doctrines founded on them. We may therefore perhaps safely admit that Quietistic mystical experiences may well have been genuine and supernatural ones; and in that case, that the doctrines founded upon them were due to mistaken inferences from them. There is, at any rate, no reason for regarding the Quietist doctrine as necessarily connected with mysticism, or as necessarily discrediting the mystical experiences—if such they were—which gave rise to them.

A precisely similar distinction must of course

be made between the approved teaching of orthodox mystics, and the incommunicable experiences on which it was founded. The reforming zeal of St Teresa and St John of the Cross had to win its way on its own merits against powerful opposition; it was very far from being considered as guaranteed by the spiritual and personal favours which gave birth to it. The frequent and extraordinary visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque, again, and the widespread popular devotion resulting from them, gained acceptance only by degrees, and after much opposition. The essentially mystical side of her life, which has been somewhat obscured in general estimation by the prominence very naturally given to her visions and revelations, is easily distinguishable amid the more striking but less evidently supernatural occurrences in which it abounds, and follows the lines uniformly characteristic of genuine mysticism.[1]

[1] "Tous les matins, lorsque je m'éveille, il me semble trouver mon Dieu présent, auquel mon cœur s'unit comme à son principe et à sa seule plénitude ; ce qui me donne une soif si ardente d'aller à l'oraison, que les moments que je mets à m'habiller me durent des heures. J'y vais le plus souvent sans

Thus the alleged difficulty of distinguishing false from true mysticism is reduced to that of discerning whether any alleged mystical state or experience is truly reported by its subject or not; and this difficulty is again greatly reduced by observing the regularity with which certain features appear in all mystical experience that may be considered genuine. The element of uncertainty still remaining arises from our frequently inadequate knowledge of the circumstances of any alleged experience—such as that of Madame Guyon above mentioned—together with the *a priori*

autre préparation que celle que mon Dieu fait en moi. . . . Il me semble quelquefois que mon esprit s'éloigne de moi, pour s'aller unir et perdre dans l'immense grandeur de son Dieu. . . . Mon entendement demeure dans un aveuglement si grand, qu'il n'a aucune lumière ni connaissance que celle que le divin Soleil de justice lui communique de temps en temps. C'est en ce temps que j'emploie toutes mes forces pour l'embrasser, non pas des bras du corps, mais des intérieurs, qui sont les puissances de mon âme. . . . J'éprouve encore des attraits si puissants, qu'il me semble que ma poitrine est toute traversée de rasoirs, ce qui m'ôte souvent le pouvoir de soupirer, n'ayant de mouvement que pour respirer avec bien de la peine. La partie inférieure ne voit ni ne connait ce qui se passe en la partie supérieure de mon âme, qui s'oublie elle-même et n'a d'autre désir que de s'unir et se perdre dans son Dieu. . . . Voilà les plus ordinaires occupations de mon oraison, non pas que je fais, mais que mon Dieu fait en moi, sa chétive créature."—*Vie par Ses Contemporaines—Vie et Œuvres*, t. i.

discredit necessarily thrown by heretical or immoral inferences upon the source to which they are ascribed. Where the alleged mystical state fulfils the conditions which admit of its being attributed to a supernatural cause, and the inferences based on it are in accord with the principles of religion and morality, there is practically no room for doubt.

CHAPTER X

MYSTICISM, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

PHILOSOPHY is the explanation of facts; and since mysticism is undoubtedly a fact, it necessarily has a certain relation to philosophy, and falls within its legitimate scope. But mysticism, unlike other facts of which philosophy has to take account, is not a normal function of the human faculties, and is not open to direct investigation. It can only be dealt with through the reports of mystical contemplatives, and no analysis of mystical states is attainable except such as is furnished by the mystics themselves, ill-equipped as they most frequently are for such a purpose. Mysticism is indeed the exact parallel of sensation, in its immediate and intuitive character. But whereas sensation is common to mankind, and the investigator is

therefore able to consider it directly, as represented in his own consciousness, as well as indirectly, through the reports of other people, as to mysticism he is mostly restricted to the latter method, and to a number of examples which, as compared with examples of sensation, is exceedingly small. Thus though the nature of mystical experience seems naturally to be as legitimate a subject of enquiry as that of sensation, the limitations under which the enquiry has to be pursued are so great as practically to destroy the parallelism altogether. And seeing how little it has so far been possible to discover in regard to the nature and cause of sensation, in spite of the comparatively numerous existing facilities for the purpose, it is not surprising that philosophy should have little or nothing to say about mysticism, which offers so much narrower a field for investigation.

Those writers, therefore, who have considered mysticism of the true or supernatural kind from the point of view of philosophy, have probably acted wisely in declining to consider the transcendental aspects of the

matter, and confining themselves to conjectural expositions of the psychological processes involved in mystical states. Mystical theology has, however, one point of contact with philosophy, in its bearing on natural theology, offering as it does an experimental verification of the rational proof of the existence of God, and of the "substantial" human soul. Such experimental evidence has been thought by some to be furnished by the doubtful phenomena of spiritualism; but it may fairly be contended that the very much less questionable evidence of mysticism is considerably more worthy of acceptance.

It must be added, however, that even if mysticism were more open to investigation than it is, it would still in its essence be beyond the purview of philosophy, as belonging exclusively to a region of which philosophy itself must stop short. The "science of causes" cannot deal inductively with the First Cause—the *causa causarum*, but must be content in all cases with noting its effects; and in regard to that particular effect on the human soul which constitutes mysticism, philosophy

can do little more than barely recognise its occurrence.[1] That species of philosophy which refuses to accept the existence of a transcendental First Cause cannot, as we have already seen, treat mysticism on its transcendental side as anything but a delusion—relying, as it must, in the absence of direct evidence, merely on a negative presupposition.

With religion, however, mysticism stands on common ground, being itself a form of religious experience. Its object is indeed the object of all religion, properly so called, since it is nothing less than the actual vision of God, which is the final consummation of all that is sought by religious practices of any kind. But

[1] Such attempts as that of M. Récéjac to formulate a purely metaphysical theory of mysticism necessarily part company with the Christian, and even with the Theistic principles on which true mysticism is based. From their point of view, the "universal mysticism" consists of "tous les moyens de transcendance qui tendent à égaler l'expérience aux désirs de la liberté"; hence it is required "que la charactère symbolique de nos rapports avec l'Absolu serait franchement reconnu, c'est-à-dire qu'on renonce à l'intuition directe d'une essence divine, universelle et infinie." (Récéjac, *Fondements de la Connaissance Mystique*, pp. 4, 5; 184.) A tendency in the same direction appears in Professor Inge's *Personal Idealism and Mysticism*, where mysticism is described as "a type of religion which puts the inner light above human authority, and finds its sacraments everywhere."

whereas mysticism attains in this world to some degree of immediate and experimental knowledge of God, religion in general remits this final reward to a future state of existence. Here God is known indirectly, or theoretically, through His works; His direct influence is perceived in the action of divine grace, and His supernatural presence is recognised by faith in the transubstantiated elements of the Eucharist. But the direct intuition of the divine being itself is not among the advantages guaranteed by the Church to its members. We have thus to consider the frequently propounded question of the relation between mysticism and what is called "institutional" religion—that is, a religion the doctrines of which are defined, and of which the practices are rigorously enjoined by a supreme and unquestionable authority. The two are often regarded as being, to a very great extent, mutually incompatible; the tendency of mysticism is, it is thought, to depreciate the external obligations, and to disregard the doctrines imposed by organised religious authority.

Something has already been said on this point. The alleged opposition between mysticism and scholasticism (which deals mainly with the doctrine and discipline imposed by external authority) has been seen to be purely imaginary. The same may undoubtedly be said of the alleged antagonism between the practical system of the Church, which follows certain prescribed methods in regard both to the obligatory elements of Christian life and those left free to individual devotion, and the inner life of contemplation, for which no rules are laid down beyond such as may be drawn from the recorded practices of pious persons.

The fact is that human nature has a twofold aspect, and consequently a twofold set of needs. On the one hand, man is a "social animal," and cannot even exist, much less lead a truly human life, in isolation; some kind of social organisation is an absolute necessity for him, in regard alike to his material, intellectual and moral requirements. On the other hand, the life of every man is individual and personal; he is self-conscious and re-

flective, as well as active and responsive: the social activities necessary to human life do not exhaust the "abysmal depths of personality," which nevertheless can only exist in a social environment. The ideally perfect condition is one in which full play is allowed to both sides of human nature—in which social needs are fully provided for, and individual thought, feeling and enterprise are hampered by no restrictions but such as are needed for their due protection. Probably no State has ever existed, or can ever exist, in which this perfect balance is maintained; in the Church, however, the restrictions imposed, deeply as they affect the external activities of the individual, are merely the necessary safeguards of spiritual liberty.

Thus in the Church, as to a great extent in the State, compliance with the obligations imposed by external authority is no more than the necessary condition of the exercise of personal liberty. Freedom for the citizen implies a condition of things in which his life and property are duly protected, not one in which he is left entirely to shift for himself;

and in like manner, religious or spiritual freedom is only possible under circumstances in which the fundamental needs of spiritual life are supplied, and its energies rightly directed. A man may not, in a rightly ordered State, preach sedition or commit suicide; that is, he is not allowed to violate the conditions under which alone he and his neighbours can freely exercise their natural powers. In like manner, the Church forbids her members to neglect the means of grace, or to teach heresy. But freedom to enjoy life, natural or supernatural, is not interfered with, but safeguarded in each case.

It is, indeed, undeniable that one aspect of human nature is from time to time unduly emphasised at the other's expense. The "Friends of God" and the disciples of Molinos, like the many forms of Protestantism, undoubtedly were led by their principles to make light of Christian institutions and of Church authority. On the other hand, a too exclusive attention to the external and legislative aspects of religion frequently produces such an intellectual aridity as may be observed in the later

and degenerate scholastics, or such a materialistic formalism as gave rise to the religious notions upheld by Febronius and put in practice by the Emperor Joseph; or to the extravagant ideas of the spiritual authority of the State which were entertained by Hobbes. But it should be observed that this depreciation of external obligations has never resulted simply from mysticism, rightly understood, but only from speculative principles alleged to be deduced from mysticism, and wrongly identified with it. True mysticism cannot come into collision with Church ordinances of any kind, simply because it belongs to a totally different sphere; it can no more be the subject of Church legislation than the height, weight or ear for music of the population can be the subject of State decrees.

It is, unfortunately, within the power of human beings—a power too frequently exercised—to separate things that are naturally and properly united. Faith and charity, public spirit and domestic affection, respect for authority and individual enterprise, are all complementary virtues. But in point of fact

faith exists without charity, public men are not invariably models of domestic virtue, nor are the most enterprising spirits always the most law-abiding. But it would be absurd to maintain that there is any natural opposition between the two factors of any of these pairs of excellences; and it is really not less absurd to imagine any natural antagonism between mysticism and spiritual authority, or that they can be mutually opposed otherwise than by the practical inadequacy due to the infirmities of human nature.

It has been abundantly shown that mysticism is in a true sense different in kind, and not merely in degree, from prayer and contemplation of the natural order. But it does not by any means follow that the two are to be regarded as radically distinct, or as mutually independent. On the contrary, there is a connection between them which may perhaps be characterised as that of continuity, as distinct from identity. The soul, it will be remembered, has, ordinarily speaking, to go through a preparation before the life of mystical contemplation can be entered upon; and

this preparation is nothing more than exercise in the lower, or more commonplace methods of devotion and piety. All religion is an approach to God, and mysticism represents, not a short cut, but an advanced stage of the journey—the more advanced the stage, the more frequent or constant is the mystical condition. The traveller sets out on his journey with no sight of his distant goal before him; he knows only that he is on the right road, and he recognises features in the landscape which others who have made the journey before him have noted, and which assure him of his progress in the right direction. But it is not till he nears his journey's end that he catches sight, indistinctly at first and intermittently, of the city he is bound for. The distant towers and spires grow clearer and clearer as he approaches them; they are seen no longer in glimpses, vanishing and reappearing at the turns of the road; till at last the whole mass of buildings comes into full sight, even while some distance remains to be travelled before the pilgrim can pass through the gates and take his well-earned

rest. It is one thing to see the finger-posts and to observe the landmarks by the way-side, and quite another to see the city standing graceful and sunlit, like a welcoming host, at the road's end. Yet both are incidents of the same journey, and the end cannot be reached without the beginning.

The relation between the two states may be very clearly seen in the *Imitation of Christ* —a book which probably owes much of its vast popularity to its constant recurrence to the elementary duties of religion and morality, and its insistence on the necessity of their performance as the prerequisite of the more exalted spiritual states. The "purgative," "illuminative" and "unitive" ways are seen, so to speak, together, and are dealt with as aspects or constituents of the Christian life as a whole, to the completeness of which all three are necessary, and, in different ways, of equal importance. The purely mystical passages are comparatively few and short; and the abundance of practical directions the book contains has sometimes caused its mystical character to be entirely overlooked

This disproportion, however, is quite sufficiently to be accounted for by the character of the work, which is that of a directory of spiritual life in general, and not a scientific treatise on any particular department of it. In such a book attempts at describing the indescribable phenomena of mysticism would obviously have been out of place, whereas the practical details of the lower and preliminary states admit of and require minute explanation. But the tone of the whole book is mystical, and the most commonplace duties and the most humiliating strivings with temptation are in a manner illuminated and glorified by the brilliancy of the result to which they tend. Thus, in point of fact, the higher and the lower elements, the mystical and the non-mystical, the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive, are blended in actual human experience. The proportion may indeed vary almost indefinitely; with some, the mystical consciousness would seem to be almost habitual, and with others a rare and exceptional privilege. But in greater or less degree, all the elements

of Christian life are present in its highest and most perfect form.

From this we are led to the consideration of a question of very great interest, in regard to which a speculative opinion may be considered allowable for which no direct evidence can be adduced. Since the higher walks of spirituality are thus inevitably interpenetrated by the lower, and since no height of mystical contemplation will wholly emancipate the contemplative from the humble necessities of penance and of temptation, is it not possible to suppose that the lower life need not wholly exclude the higher, but however dry and commonplace and, generally speaking, unspiritual it may be, may nevertheless be enriched by some occasional and transient participation in the privilege of the more perfect state? It is admitted by all spiritual writers that the mystical life does not exclude the vicissitudes of the ordinary or non-mystical states.[1] Little or nothing is said by them,

[1] *E.g.*, Suarez, *De Orat.*, 1. 2. 11; and *cf.* Devine, *Manual of Mystical Theology*, ch. 1., and Macarius, *Christian Perfection*, v. 13, 14.

however, as to the possibility of some measure of the higher life entering into the lower—of some passing foretaste of "infused" contemplation being granted to those whose lives are, as a whole, by no means of the contemplative order. Yet it seems natural to suppose that such may be the case. If there is no incongruity in the recurrence in the unitive life of the distinctive features of the purgative, there can hardly be any in the occasional occurrence of the converse process; and it seems not unreasonable to suppose that such a *largesse* of spiritual favours, of which the best are unworthy, may be occasionally granted even to the most undeserving. It can hardly be denied that an aspect which it is difficult to distinguish from that of genuine mysticism seems at times to belong to some of the inward experiences of ordinary persons who have no thought or knowledge of the contemplative life. Such states of consciousness are, indeed, too transitory and elusive to be judged of with any degree of certainty; and it may be that they are really no more than the product of purely natural feeling. Proof is either way

out of the question. But it is at least an allowable opinion that the "mystical element in religion" may extend beyond the limits within which alone evidence of any direct kind is attainable; and such an opinion must unquestionably be nearer the truth than that which would equalise all religious experience by denying to mysticism its genuinely supernatural character.

CHAPTER XI

DIONYSIUS

The authority of the Dionysian writings is for us (whatever may have been the case in earlier and less critical times) derived rather from the use made of them to express the received doctrines of the Church than from any view that may be entertained of the identity or position of the writer. Their history is a curious one. They first received public notice at a conference held at Constantinople in the year 533 between representatives of orthodoxy under Hypatius, Bishop of Ephesus, and those of a Monophysite sect called after and headed by Severus, patriarch of Antioch. The Severians at this conference appealed to the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite as upholding the Monophysite doctrine, but their quotations were disallowed

by Hypatius as probably spurious. From that time forward an increasing importance was attached to the works attributed to the Areopagite, not only by heretical writers, but also by orthodox Catholics, among whom may be mentioned Eulogius, patriarch of Alexandria in 580, Pope Gregory the Great, and Maximus, the author of lengthy scholia on the Dionysian books; and Dionysius was referred to by the Lateran Council in 649 as an authority against Monothelitism. On the introduction of the Dionysian writings into France in the eighth century the idea arose that the author was identical with St Denys of France; and Hilduin, abbot of St Denys at Paris, subsequently did much to promote the authority of the Areopagite by means of this patriotic identification, which, it need hardly be said, has no historical value whatever.

The works of Dionysius were first translated into Latin by Hilduin, and somewhat later by John Scotus Eriugena; other translations were made by John Sarrazenus, Grosseteste, Thomas Vercellensis, Ambrosius Camaldu-

lensis, Marsilio Ficino and Balthasar Corderius. Commentaries were written by Hugo of St Victor, Albertus Magnus, St Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Carthusian; and the great scholastics make copious references to Dionysius—notably St Thomas Aquinas. Dionysius was called, with some pardonable exaggeration, the founder of the Scholastic method, by Corderius, who gives an imposing list of St Thomas's references to him.

Doubts began once more to be cast on the genuineness of the *Dionysiaca* by writers of the Renaissance period: the question was raised by Lorenzo Valla, and was for long a subject of vehement controversy, which can hardly be said even yet to be at an end, though the opinion of the most recent and most competent scholars is on the negative side. The arguments on each side may be briefly summarised as follows:—

1. The style is not that of the sub-apostolic age, but closely resembles that of later Neoplatonist writers.

2. The correspondence of ideas between the works of Dionysius and those of Neoplatonist

authors, more especially of Proclus, is very close; moreover, extracts from Proclus's work *De Subsistentia Malorum* appear, as has been pointed out by Professors Stiglmayer and Koch, in the treatise of Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*.

3. No mention is made of the Dionysian writings by any author earlier than the sixth century: nor are they mentioned by Eusebius or St Jerome in their catalogues of ecclesiastical authors. The writings in which they were thought to have been referred to before that period have now been proved to be of much more recent date.

4. Certain rites and ceremonies are mentioned as customary in the writer's time which were unknown to the contemporaries of the Areopagite. Other anachronisms are the mention of monks; the use of the word ὑπόστασις (*substantia*) in its later or post-Nicene sense; a reference to ecclesiastical tradition as ἀρχάια παραδόσις = "the *ancient* tradition"; a quotation of the well-known phrase of St Clement of Rome, "My love is crucified" (*Div. Nom.*, 4), though St Clement's martyrdom did not take

place till after the death of St Timothy, to whom the *Treatise de Div. Nom.* is dedicated, and who is, moreover, addressed by the author as παῖς = "child" at a supposed time when the designation could scarcely have been appropriate.

None of these arguments were altogether unknown to antiquity, though some of them have been considerably strengthened by modern research. They were replied to at some length by Monsignor (afterwards Archbishop) Darboy, who fairly reproduces all the considerations that have been adduced in favour of the Dionysian authorship from St Maximus onwards.

1. It is contended that the style is due to the early philosophical education of the Areopagite, which would naturally have imparted to it many of the characteristics of Neoplatonism; it may fairly be considered as agreeing with the presumed date of the author.

2 & 3. The correspondences between the *Dionysiaca* and Proclus may be due to plagiarism on the part of the Neoplatonist, rather

than of the Areopagite. Georgius Pachymeres, when advancing this opinion, suggests that the Dionysian works may have been suppressed by the Athenian philosophers who borrowed from them for their own purposes.

4. The anachronisms found in Dionysius are capable of being explained away. Thus, it is fairly certain that the essentials of such ceremonies as the blessing of the baptismal water, triple immersion at baptism, and the rites for blessing the Holy Oils were in use in Apostolic or sub-Apostolic times, though not then committed to writing; the strange ceremony of anointing the dead, mentioned by Dionysius, is found to have been a Jewish, and therefore probably also an early Christian custom. Monks (*therapeutæ*) need not be understood to mean cœnobites or hermits, and a class so called certainly existed in Philo's time. The use of "ὑπόστασις," in its earlier and untechnical sense of "person," is paralleled from Heb. i., and the word is used in the same sense by Alexander, the predecessor of St Athanasius. The quotation from St Ignatius may have been added in a recension by the

author, or may have been the work of a copyist; and a parallel to the phrase "ἀρχάια παραδόσις" may be found in 2 Thess. ii. 14. The designation of St Timothy as "child" is justified by an elaborate calculation of the comparative ages of Dionysius and St Timothy.

On the whole, it may be held that though the Dionysian authorship is not absolutely disproved, the balance of probability is strongly against it. Who the writer, if not Dionysius, may have been, or when he may have lived, it is quite impossible to say. Various dates have been suggested; but the use apparently made of the writings of Proclus seem to point to one not earlier than 462. Hipler's theory that the author was a theologian of the fourth century whose works were, by a misunderstanding, attributed to Dionysius, found some favour at the time of its production (1861), but is now generally rejected. It is indeed difficult to suppose that the direct statements of the author to the effect that he had been a disciple of St Paul, that he remembered the eclipse at the time of the Crucifixion, and that he was present with St Peter and his

otherwise unknown master Hierotheus at the interment of the Blessed Virgin, are made with any other purpose than that of supporting his identity, whether real or assumed.

It is of some practical importance to consider whether the value of the books is in any way discredited by the unauthentic character which may with at least great probability be attributed to them.

In the first place, it would probably be unfair to regard them simply as a forgery. As Monsignor Darboy has remarked, no possible motive can be assigned for a forgery of this kind. They could hardly, like the forgeries of Chatterton, have been intended to reflect credit on their supposed discoverer, or to be a source of profit to him; and the supposition that they may have been intended to give support to the cause of orthodoxy is hardly consistent with their subject-matter, which is not directly concerned with any of the controversies belonging to the time of their appearance. Moreover, though perfectly orthodox, they were first quoted in favour of heretics, to whose views they gave no real support. It

must be remembered that our present ideas of literary propriety had by no means obtained acceptance in the sixth century; and our modern device of making fiction a vehicle for historical, philosophical or theological speculation had not yet been discovered. Romances were, however, not unknown, and pseudonymous works of a historical and theological character existed in some numbers. We may fairly consider that the *Dionysiaca* combined both characters. The author would seem to have intended to give the Christian rendering of the philosophico-religious system evolved by Plotinus and later Neoplatonism; and he may have sought to gain a hearing for his views by publishing them under the name of one who had held positions of honour both in the Pagan and in the Christian world. For the sake of verisimilitude the appropriate contemporary references were rather crudely inserted. Whatever, therefore, we may think of the artistic character of the work, we have no more right to fix upon it the moral stigma of forgery than to condemn on similar grounds such works as *Waverley*, *John Inglesant* or *En Route*.

But in any case, the work is of a character which cannot be affected by the authority attributed to its author, as, for example, a historical work professedly written by a contemporary would be. The Dionysian books must stand on their own merits, no matter by whom or at what time they were written: what they say is true or false for all times and all persons. Their authority, for us, lies not in their authenticity, as the works of any particular writer, but in the fact that they have been adopted by the Church as truly representative of certain phases of her doctrine, and as containing nothing contrary to it: it is, in fact, the accumulated authority of the long list of approved writers whose work has been based on, or in accordance with them.

This is more especially the case with the *Mystical Theology* and the three letters connected with it. These deal simply with the relations between God, the world of created things, and the soul of man. They depend on no references to persons, places or events, but appeal to that perception of the inner truth of things which is alike in all ages and

all countries, and which probably no man is altogether without.

The other extant works of Dionysius are the *Divine Names*, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and six letters on different subjects, in addition to the three here translated. The *Treatise of Divine Names* deals with the unique, transcendental nature of God, which of its superabundant fulness creates all that is external to God, and gives to each order of being its proper degree of the divine likeness, and its function of communicating a share of the divine gifts to the order below it. It is hardly necessary to remark that we have here the Christian rendering of the Neoplatonic "one," the Neoplatonic and Gnostic doctrines of emanation, and the Gnostic "Pleroma," or fulness, touched on in a manner somewhat like the Dionysian treatment by St John and St Paul. (St John i.; Eph. i. 23; iii. 19; Coloss. i. 19; ii. 9.)

In the other two treatises, the Angelic hierarchy in its ninefold choirs, and the various orders of the Church, from bishop to penitent, are described. These are the more

striking and important examples of the creative energy that flows out from the one personal God, as the primeval Creator, and as the incarnate Head of the Church. In these books God is considered as in a true sense immanent in the creatures which He nevertheless transcends; as in the *Mystical Theology*, the necessity is insisted on of rising above the created manifestations of the divine power and excellence, for those who desire to obtain some knowledge of the Creator as He is in Himself.

The influence of Neoplatonism, in both terminology and method, is obvious enough in the Dionysian writings, and through them has directly or indirectly passed into nearly all the mystical literature of subsequent ages. But, as we have already seen, the pantheistic doctrines of Neoplatonism are entirely rejected by Dionysius, and are indeed incompatible with his view of creation and of the relations, actual or possible, between God and the soul. It may therefore be plausibly surmised that the main object of the author was to present the orthodox Christian view of the fundamental questions with which all philosophy

and theology has to deal, in the form which would be most acceptable to the contemporary philosophic mind, and in terms of that mode of thought which was "in the air" at the time of writing. In much the same way Aristotelianism was christianised by St Thomas, and many apologetic works of the last fifty years have sought to express the concepts of Christian theology in terms of the current physiology and psychology.[1]

Dionysius refers to several works of his own which seem to have remained entirely unknown, and which are by some thought to have had no real existence. These are *Theological Outlines*, *Sacred Hymns*, *Symbolic Theology*, *The Just Judgment of God*, *The Soul*, and *The Objects of Sense and Intellect*.

A full account of the Dionysian writings is given by Professor Stiglmayer in the American *Catholic Encyclopædia*; a less recent one is to be found in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography*. The available evidence for the

[1] "These works were intended to show that all which the Platonic school had gathered of truth in all parts of the world and in all ages, is to be found in a far purer and more complete form in Christianity."—Görres, *Mystique Divine Naturelle et Diabolique* (tr. par Ste Foix), vol. i. p. 67.

authorship is discussed in Darboy's *Œuvres de St Denys*, Lupton's introduction to Dean Colet's *Paraphrase of Dionysius*, and Bardenhewer's *Patrologie*.

Modern translations have been published in German by Engelhart (1823) and Storf (*Kirchliche Hierarchie*, 1877), and in French by Darboy (*Œuvres de St Denys*, 1845) and Dulac (1865). In English a translation was completed in 1895 by Rev. J. Parker; and a translation of the *Mystical Theology* was published in London in 1653, in a volume of sermons by John Everard, D.D., entitled *Some Gospel Treasures opened: or the Holiest of all Unvailing — whereunto is added the Mystical Divinity of Dionysius the Areopagite, spoken of Acts xvii.* 34.

The most recent, and the most accessible edition of the text of Dionysius is that of Corderius, S.J., published at Antwerp 1634, and frequently reprinted, together with Latin translation, translator's notes, the commentary of St Maximus and the paraphrase of Pachymeres; the same edition is included in Migne's Greek *Patrology*.

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

CHAPTER I

What the Divine Darkness is

SUMMARY.—(1) Address to the Blessed Trinity. (2) Those to whom mystical knowledge is open must be distinguished from those who do not realise the transcendental character of the divine nature, and still more, from those who liken the Creator to the creature in idolatry: whereas in God all qualities of created existence are to be found *eminenter* — though at the same time such qualities cannot strictly be predicated of Him, who is above all created things. In other words, God transcends creation, but all the perfections of creatures are derived from Him, and constitute a certain likeness to Him. Hence the Gospel is both great and small—*i.e.*, it declares the manifold variety and complexity of God's works, but His own absolute simplicity and unity. (3) Therefore those who would see God must pass beyond the limits of creation, into a state which is beyond human knowledge and light and speech, and must therefore, from the point of view of created beings, be called

one of ignorance, darkness and silence; as Moses was commanded to separate himself from all impurity before entering the Divine presence, so those who would now enter that presence must separate themselves from all created things.

Most exalted Trinity, Divinity above all knowledge, whose goodness passes understanding, who dost guide Christians to divine wisdom; direct our way to the summit of thy mystical oracles, most incomprehensible, most lucid and most exalted, where the simple and pure and unchangeable mysteries of theology are revealed in the darkness, clearer than light, of that silence in which secret things are hidden; a darkness that shines brighter than light, that invisibly and intangibly illuminates with splendours of inconceivable beauty the soul that sees not. Let this be my prayer; but do thou, dear Timothy, diligently giving thyself to mystical contemplation, leave the senses, and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intelligible, and things that are and things that are not, that thou mayest rise as may be lawful for thee, by ways above knowledge to union with Him

who is above all knowledge and all being; that in freedom and abandonment of all, thou mayest be borne, through pure, entire and absolute abstraction of thyself from all things, into the supernatural radiance of the divine darkness.

But see that none of the uninitiated[1] hear these things. I mean those who cleave to created things, and suppose not that anything exists after a supernatural manner, above nature; but imagine that by their own natural understanding they know Him who has made darkness His secret place. But if the principles of the divine mysteries are above the under-

[1] *The Uninitiated.*—The two classes of uninitiated here referred to are, first, the less spiritually minded among Christians, and secondly, the heathen. Corderius considers that by the first non-Christian philosophers rather than Christians of any kind are intended: but the Neoplatonist contemplatives could hardly be described in the terms here used, and they only could have been the "philosophers" in question. The distinction drawn by some between the words by which the two classes are designated (ἀμύητοι=not fully instructed, and ἀμύσται=not formally admitted) is perhaps fanciful, but is probably the true explanation of the classification intended. The impotence of the natural faculties in mystical contemplation is here stated as a first principle of mystical theology. Compare St John of the Cross, *Asc.* ii. 4: "It is clearly necessary for the soul aiming at its own supernatural transformation to be in darkness and far removed from all that relates to its natural condition."

standing of these, what is to be said of those yet more untaught, who call the absolute First Cause of all after the lowest things in nature, and say that He is in no way above the images which they fashion after various designs; of whom they should declare and affirm that in Him as the cause of all, is all that may be predicated positively of created things; while yet they might with more propriety deny these predicates to Him, as being far above all; holding that here denial is not contrary to affirmation, since He is infinitely above all notion of deprivation, and above all affirmation and negation.

Thus the divine Bartholomew says that Theology is both much and very little, and that the Gospel is great and ample, and yet short. His sublime meaning is, I think, that the beneficent cause of all things says much, and says little, and is altogether silent, as having neither (human) speech nor (human) understanding, since He is essentially above all created things, and manifests Himself unveiled, and as He truly is to those only who pass beyond all that is either pure or impure,

who rise above the highest height of holy things, who abandon all divine light and sound and heavenly speech, and are absorbed into that darkness where, as the Scripture says, He truly is, who is beyond all things.

It was not without a deeper meaning that the divine Moses was commanded first to be himself purified, and then to separate himself from the impure; and after all this purification heard many voices of trumpets, and saw many lights shedding manifold pure beams: and that he was thereafter separated from the multitude and together with the elect priests came to the height of the divine ascents. Yet hereby he did not attain to the presence of God Himself; he saw not Him (for He cannot be looked upon), but the place where He was. This, I think, signifies that the divinest and most exalted of visible and intelligible things are, as it were, suggestions of those that are immediately beneath Him who is above all, whereby is indicated the presence of Him who passes all understanding, and stands, as it were, in that spot which is conceived by the intellect as the highest

of His holy places; then that they who are free and untrammelled by all that is seen and all that sees enter into the true mystical darkness of ignorance, whence all perception of understanding is excluded, and abide in that which is intangible and invisible, being wholly absorbed in Him who is beyond all things, and belong no more to any, neither to themselves nor to another, but are united in their higher part to Him who is wholly unintelligible, and whom, by understanding nothing, they understand after a manner above all intelligence.

Chapter II

How to be united with, and to give praise to Him who is the cause of all things and above all

Summary. — Therefore God is only to be known in a supernatural manner, by abstraction from all that is natural. Natural sight and knowledge are useless for the purpose of seeing and knowing what is above nature: the supernatural can only be perceived in entire separation from all that is merely natural. In this sense, natural light and knowledge merely obscure the vision; we can see God only in a "luminous darkness"—which is *darkness* because of the absence of created light, *luminous* because of the divine presence there made known. As, in order to form our conception of God, we add together the divine attributes (in speculative theology), so (in mystical theology) we must subtract them, from the lowest to the highest, in order to arrive at the essential nature of God.[1]

We desire to abide in this most luminous darkness, and without sight or knowledge, to

[1] *The Divine Attributes.*—God's attributes, such as wisdom, justice, goodness, etc., are human conceptions in themselves. We know them as they are manifested in the works of God, not as they exist in Himself. God is not, so to speak, the mere sum of His attributes, but the simple divine essence, which in

see that which is above sight or knowledge, by means of that very fact that we see not and know not. For this is truly to see and know, to praise Him who is above nature in a manner above nature, by the abstraction of all that is natural; as those who would make a statue out of the natural stone abstract all the surrounding material which hinders the sight of the shape lying concealed within, and by that abstraction alone reveal its hidden beauty.[1] It is needful, as I think, to make this abstraction in a manner precisely opposite

different aspects *is* each of the divine attributes. Thus we truly say that God *is* love, justice, mercy, etc.; but we could not truly say that love, justice, mercy, etc., together *constitute* God. Therefore those who, in any sense, see God in Himself must contrive to go behind all those created forms in which His perfection is manifested. (See *Summa Theol.* I. xiii. 2, 3.)

[1] This illustration is used by Plotinus (de Pulcritudine, vii.), and is adduced as an argument against the identity of the author with the Areopagite by upholders of the contrary view. It expresses very precisely the attitude of mysticism towards the immanence of God, though it cannot be pressed as an illustration of the nature of immanence. The statue is revealed by abstracting superfluous material, as God is made known by abstracting all that is not God. But the residuum, which is the statue, is of the same nature as the abstracted superfluity; whereas the abstraction of what is natural leaves only the supernatural, or divine. Compare St John of the Cross, ii. 5: "In every soul God dwells and is substantially present . . . the soul, when it has driven away from itself all that is contrary to the Divine Will, becomes transformed in God by love."

to that in which we deal with the Divine attributes; for we add them together, beginning with the primary ones, and passing from them to the secondary, and so to the last; but here we ascend from the last to the first, abstracting all, so as to unveil and know that which is beyond knowledge, and which in all things is hidden from our sight by that which can be known, and so to behold that supernatural darkness which is hidden by all such light as is in created things.

Chapter III

What is affirmed of God, and what is denied of Him

Summary.—(1) The Being of God and the Names of God are expounded in the *Theological Outlines* and the treatise of *Divine Names* respectively, and the method according to which God is spoken of in terms of sensible things is treated of in the *Symbolical Theology*.[1] It was obvious that there was less to be said of the divine nature itself than of the different ways in which it may be partially expressed in human speech. So here we pass in contemplation of God not merely to economy of words, but beyond speech itself. (2) In affirming God's nature we must compare it with what is beneath it; but in denying of it that which it is not, we must distinguish all things from it, according to their degrees of remoteness. Thus we add in the one case, and subtract in the other.

In our Outlines of Theology we have declared those matters which are properly the subject of Positive Theology; in what sense the holy divine nature is one, and in what sense three; what it is that is there called Paternity, and

[1] *See* preceding chapter.

what Filiation; and what the doctrine of the Holy Ghost signifies; how from the uncreated and undivided good those blessed and perfect Lights have come forth, yet remained one with the divine nature, with each other, and in themselves, undivided by coeternal abiding in propagation; how Jesus though immaterial became material in the truth of human nature; and other things taken from Scripture we have expounded in the same place. Again in the Book of Divine Names (we have shown) how God is called good, how Being, how Life and Wisdom and Virtue, with other names spiritually applied to Him. Then in the treatise of Symbolical Theology we saw what names have been transferred to Him from sensible things—what is meant by the divine forms and figures, limbs, instruments, localities, adornments, fury, anger and grief; drunkenness, oaths and curses, sleep and waking, with other modes of sacred and symbolical nomenclature. I think you will have understood why the last are more diffuse than the first; for the exposition of theological doctrine and the explanation of the divine names are neces-

sarily shorter than the treatise on symbolism. Because in proportion as we ascend higher our speech is contracted to the limits of our view of the purely intelligible; and so now, when we enter that darkness which is above understanding, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence, and the negation of thought. Thus in the other treatises our subject took us from the highest to the lowest, and in the measure of this descent our treatment of it extended itself; whereas now we rise from beneath to that which is the highest, and accordingly our speech is restrained in proportion to the height of our ascent; but when our ascent is accomplished, speech will cease altogether, and be absorbed into the ineffable. But why, you will ask, do we add in the first and begin to abstract in the last? The reason is that we affirmed that which is above all affirmation by comparison with that which is most nearly related to it, and were therefore compelled to make a *hypothetical*[1] affirmation; but when

[1] "*Hypothetical*" (or comparative), *i.e.*, setting one thing *below* another. God is infinitely higher than the highest created thing: and He is to be distinguished from all forms of created

we abstract that which is above all abstraction, we must distinguish it also from those things which are most remote from it. Is not God more nearly life and goodness than air or a stone; must we not deny more fully that He is drunken or enraged, than that He can be spoken of or understood?

existence, high and low alike: yet He is more truly life than a stone (comparative or hypothetical affirmation): He is more absolutely not passionate than ineffable (comparative abstraction or negation). Thus in affirmation "more" is predicated of what is nearer to God; in negation, of what is remoter from Him (Corderius). In the hierarchy of creation, the higher the form of existence, the greater its resemblance to God: yet in all there is the infinite difference of the creature from the Creator. We have here the Theistic or Christian rendering of the Neoplatonic and Gnostic doctrines of emanation.

Chapter IV

That He who is the supreme cause of all sensible things is Himself no part of those things

Summary. — The Creator is not a mere lifeless and unintelligent abstraction; yet He is wholly distinct from all forms of sensible existence.

We say that the cause of all things, who is Himself above all things, is neither without being nor without life, nor without reason nor without intelligence;[1] nor is He a body; nor has He form or shape, or quality or quantity or mass; He is not localised or visible or tangible; He is neither sensitive nor sensible; He is subject to no disorder or disturbance arising from material passion; He is not subject to failure of power, or to the

[1] The supreme, universal, or first cause cannot be identified with any of its effects, or with all of them together. The *simplicity* of the divine nature implies entire distinction from all created things. (See *Summa Theol.* I. 3. 8.)

accidents of sensible things; He needs no light; He suffers no change or corruption or division, or privation or flux; and He neither has nor is anything else that belongs to the senses.

Chapter V

That He who is the supreme cause of all intelligible things is Himself no part of those things

Summary. — The Creator is distinct from all merely intelligible forms of existence, being neither one of them nor all of them together.

Again, ascending, we say that He is neither soul nor intellect; nor has He imagination, nor opinion or reason; He has neither speech nor understanding, and is neither declared nor understood; He is neither number nor order, nor greatness nor smallness, nor equality nor likeness nor unlikeness; He does not stand or move or rest; He neither has power nor is power; nor is He light, nor does He live, nor is He life; He is neither being nor age nor time; nor is He subject to intellectual contact; He is neither knowledge nor truth, nor royalty nor wisdom; He is neither one

nor unity, nor divinity, nor goodness;[1] nor is He spirit, as we understand spirit; He is neither sonship nor fatherhood nor anything else known to us or to any other beings, either of the things that are or the things that are not; nor does anything that is, know Him as He is, nor does He know anything that is as it is; He has neither word nor name nor knowledge; He is neither darkness nor light nor truth nor error; He can neither be affirmed nor denied;[2] nay, though we may affirm or deny the things that are beneath Him, we can neither affirm nor deny Him; for the perfect and sole cause of all is above all affirmation, and that which transcends all is above all subtraction, absolutely separate, and beyond all that is.

[1] *Neither one nor, etc.*—*See* Letter II. to Caius, where the sense is explained in which this statement is to be understood. There is a sense in which God *is* His own nature; *i.e.*, as it is in itself, not in the inadequate sense in which alone it may be conceived or experienced by us. See *Summa Theol.* I. 3. 3, where it may be remarked that St Thomas says, not "Deus est Deitas," but "Deus est *sua* Deitas."

[2] *He can neither be affirmed nor denied.*—The divine nature cannot be adequately (though it may be truly) defined, either positively or negatively.

Letter I

To Caius the Monk

Summary.—The discursive operation of the intellect not only is not the means by which God is to be experimentally known, but actually precludes such knowledge: the mind knows God by a supernatural operation, which transcends its natural functions.

Darkness is destroyed by light, especially by much light; ignorance is destroyed by knowledge, especially by much knowledge. You must understand this as implying not privation, but transcendence;[1] and so you must say with absolute truth, that the ignorance which is of God is unknown by those who have the created light and the knowledge of created things, and that His transcendent

[1] *Transcendence* (ὑπεροχικῶς).—The ignorance by which man sees God is more, not less, than natural knowledge—it is not ignorance of the objects of natural knowledge, but the rejection of such knowledge as out of relation to the supernatural sphere in which God is experimentally known.

darkness is obscured by any light, and itself obscures all knowledge. And if any one, seeing God, knows what he sees, it is by no means God that he so sees, but something created and knowable. For God abides above created intellect and existence, and is in such sense unknowable and non-existent that He exists above all existence, and is known above all power of knowledge. Thus the knowledge of Him who is above all that can be known is for the most part ignorance.

Letter II

To the Same

Summary.—God is above and beyond that divinity and goodness which we know, which we seek to imitate, and of which we are made partakers, as being their source and fountain head.

How can He who is beyond all things be also above the very principle of divinity and of goodness? By divinity and goodness must be understood the essence of the gift which makes us good and divine, or that unapproachable semblance of the supreme goodness and divinity whereby we also are made good and divine. For since this is the principle of deification and sanctification for those who are so deified and sanctified, then He who is the essential principle of all principles (and therefore the principle of divinity and goodness) is above that divinity and goodness by means

of which we are made good and divine:[1] moreover, since He is inimitable and incomprehensible, He is above imitation and comprehension as He is above those who imitate and partake of Him.

[1] *Inimitable, etc.*—Man's goodness and sanctity can resemble God's only analogically, not absolutely. We cannot imitate the unique pre-eminence of God, though we may endeavour with eventful success to fulfil His will perfectly, as He perfectly fulfils His own will.

Letter V

To Dorotheus the Deacon

Summary.—Since God transcends all things, both sensible and intelligible, He can be known only by separation from the senses and the intellect. Thus the inaccessible light in which He dwells is darkness by reason of its excess.

The divine darkness is the inaccessible light in which God is said to dwell. And since He is invisible by reason of the abundant outpouring of supernatural light, it follows that whosoever is counted worthy to know and see God, by the very fact that he neither sees nor knows Him, attains to that which is above sight and knowledge, and at the same time perceives that God is beyond[1] all things both sensible and intelligible, saying

[1] *Beyond all things* (μετὰ πάντα), not "in" or "with" all things as it has been translated, but "after" them—*i.e.*, from the human point of view, in which the natural comes before and is nearer than the supernatural.

with the Prophet, "Thy knowledge is become wonderful to me; it is high, and I cannot reach to it." In like manner, St Paul, we are told, knew God, when he knew Him to be above all knowledge and understanding; wherefore he says that His ways are unsearchable and His judgments inscrutable, His gifts unspeakable, and His peace passing all understanding; as one who had found Him who is above all things, and whom he had perceived to be above knowledge, and separate from all things, being the Creator of all.

APPENDIX I

THE REALITY OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

UNTIL very lately it was commonly believed that thought proceeds by means of a succession of mental pictures, sometimes called "ideas," and more recently and correctly "images." Sense-impressions on the physical organs were held to form these pictures in the mind; they were afterwards said to be revived, less and less clearly, in process of time by the memory.

But the most recent psychological investigations—by Bühler, Ach, Watt, Betts and others—have proved the existence in consciousness of "imageless thought." Mental pictures, or images, of course exist, and are part of the subject matter of thought. But thought, it has been shown, can and does go on without them; and in either case, not mental pictures as

such, but the concept connected with them is the essential matter with which thought deals.

It has been shown by Moore that there exist imageless mental contents representative of visible objects; and further, that the process of perception consists in assimilation of the data of sense-experience to their appropriate mental categories.[1]

A series of experiments performed by Dr. Aveling[2] has proved that concepts are not the same as images, but are introspectively discriminable from them, and can and do occur alone in consciousness; they are, further, capable of objective reference and of conveying meaning by themselves, whereas images are not. These experiments have shown that what is essentially involved in the thought-process is the concept. Images also appear in it, sometimes as a means of fixing and sustaining thought, and sometimes by mere association, a concept in its origin being inevitably connected

[1] *The Process of Abstraction*, T. V. Moore, Berkeley, U.S.A., 1910.

[2] I am indebted for this information to Dr. F. Aveling, of University College, London. See *The Consciousness of the Universal*, F. Aveling (Macmillan, 1912).

with an image. The basis for existential cognition is thus shown to be sensational in character; no new concept can be formed apart from this sensational element. But the concept being once formed on this sensational basis, thinking, it has been demonstrated, can take place with no mental contents other than concepts. Concepts, and not images, are the essential elements of thinking.

These discoveries have a most important bearing on the psychic process involved in mystical experience, and confirm in a remarkable way the account of that process given in Chapters III., IV. and V. They further supply an explanation of natural mental states bearing some resemblance to mystical contemplation, which renders superfluous the hypothesis adopted by Professor James and others, of the existence of states of consciousness of entirely specific quality, and aroused in certain peculiar temperaments by external stimulation. We shall see that there is no reason for assuming any such specific state of consciousness in order to account for either true mystical experiences or those which, though not

genuinely mystical, have often been classed with them; and that the essentially conceptual nature of thought affords a criterion which renders it possible to distinguish accurately between the two kinds of experience, at least in cases where full information is obtainable.

The theory may be stated in somewhat less technical terms as follows. Thought implies two things—the action of the mind itself, and that upon which the mind acts. This latter is called the mental *content*, because what is thought of is contained in the mind; the external object is the source from which the mental content is derived, but is not the actual mental content; the immediate subject matter of thought is not things in themselves, but those things as they appear in the mind by representation. How, then, are they represented? Is it by a series of mental photographs, or by something else which the mind itself adds to the sensible impression, thereby imparting a kind of thought-character to the impression? It was formerly supposed that the essential thing for thought was a picture or image of the sight, sound, touch, &c., with

which the mind had to deal, and which, in a certain sense, identified the mind with the external object; this image was held to be clear and precise at the moment of its formation, and to become fainter and more indistinct when revived by the memory after an increasing interval of time. It has now, however, been demonstrated that the essential subject matter of thought, or mental content, is not the image of a sensible object, but a purely intelligible factor which arises in the mind at the moment of sense perception, and is called the *concept*. It must therefore be held that the total mental content derived by the mind from external objects is compounded of two kinds of elements, one sensorial and the other conceptual—one depending on the stimulation of the senses, and the other on the simultaneous action of the mind. Of these two factors, one, the sensational, is necessary for the original formation of the mental content; the other, the conceptual, is inseparably connected with the sense-image, which apart from the conceptual factor could not be in consciousness, and would have no existence for consciousness at all. The act

of perception is accordingly a process by which sensational experiences are connected with their appropriate concepts. Every sensation of which we are conscious carries with it a mental concept, however elementary or indistinct it may be. The concept, then, is what thought cannot do without. But can it do without the sense-image? Can we think, that is to say, without recalling any picture or image of what we are thinking about? It has now been demonstrated that we can, and very frequently do. The image is obviously necessary as the original basis of the concept; but it is not necessary for subsequent thought that the same image should re-appear (which in fact is never the case), or that a new one should be formed. We can go on thinking by means of concepts alone. Images, however, do appear in the process of thought according to certain fixed laws: they are useful sometimes as supports to the attention; sometimes, again, they are merely distracting, and in some cases they apparently neither help nor hinder thought. Thought therefore deals primarily and directly with concepts, indirectly with images; concepts

are necessarily based on images at the moment when a thing is perceived for the first time; afterwards, when the thing is remembered, it is the concept which is revived, either with or without sense-images. It follows that the concepts existing in a free state in the mind may, according to circumstances, either remain dissociated from all other concepts and all images, or be associated with fresh images, or with other concepts suggested by those images or by the concepts themselves. For instance, I may think of mankind without any mental picture at all; what the thought means is clear without any further reference. But then after my attention has been fixed for some moments on this object, there arises in my mind a vague image of a typical man; then he may become more definite as a particular species of man; then more definite still, till by a process of association I come to think of a particular man whose appearance is well known to me, and of whom I construct a more or less detailed mental picture. Finally, this picture may easily suggest a further and quite different picture of the place in which I last saw my friend. The whole pro-

cess is a very common one, and may easily be tested. From it we see that, first, it is quite possible to consider a concept by itself, without any representative image; secondly, that such a free concept will naturally suggest others more or less closely allied to it by nature; and thirdly, that a fresh image or set of images may ultimately come into consciousness as the mediate consequence of the concept with which the train of thought started.

Let us now apply these considerations to the object of mystical contemplation. That, we have seen, must be immaterial; one, that is, in the knowledge of which the senses can have no part, and which is incapable of representation by images or pictures. But this, we now find, is the essential characteristic of all mental objects: they are essentially immaterial, and merely intelligible, no matter whether accompanied by mental imagery or not. The mystical contemplation of God is therefore in itself of precisely the same kind as every other sort of mental consideration; it is the consideration of an immaterial object, directly and without any aid from the senses. Thus

the difficulty which has been felt in supposing that the embodied soul can have a direct intuition of what is purely immaterial is entirely got rid of; and St. Thomas's metaphysical explanation[1] of the manner in which the beatific vision takes place is confirmed by the latest demonstration of experimental science. The process which St. Thomas describes in terms of "hylomorphism"—as the union of matter and form—is identical with that which the science of the present day calls the acquisition of mental content. God, in St. Thomas's language, becomes "form" to the soul's "matter" in those who see Him: in the language of experimental psychology He becomes in them their "mental content." The two theories are really the same theory reached by two different roads—one inductive and metaphysical, the other deductive and experimental.

It is of interest to notice further that the place and function assigned by this theory to revived sense-imagery in thought is precisely that which mystics have assigned to the visions, locutions and auditions of mystical experience

[1] See p. 94.

(see pp. 85, 86). Such images are, in fact, by-products, and serve at most as supports to the soul in mystical contemplation of the less exalted, as compared with the purely intellectual kind.

The reality of the object of mystical contemplation thus appears to be of the same character as that of the ordinary objects of thought. The mystic who contemplates God in his own soul is performing an action psychologically identical with that which he performs when he looks into a shop window, or notices the faces of the passers-by in the street, or when he recalls the appearance of someone whom he knows well. It is in every case primarily an intelligible or conceptual object that he contemplates, and not primarily a sensible one. The only difference is that the conceptual object is, in the one case, traceable to an origin in some sense experience, and, in the other, derived immediately from a directly spiritual source; and, as has been already remarked, there is considerably less difficulty in understanding a mental state to be derived from a mental impulse than in explaining the connection

between a purely conceptual object of thought and the sense-stimulus on which it depends.

The reality of visions, locutions and auditions is again parallel with that of the revived sense-images which accompany thought. They are real mental images, and they accompany real concepts —of this there can obviously be no doubt. But by reality is commonly understood the correspondence of that which the mind perceives with something external to it which reaches it by means of the senses. Is there any such external reality about the visions of mystics? Was the ring received by St. Rose of Lima a real ring—were the crown of thorns and the stigmata of St. Catherine of Siena real in this sense—did St. Hildegard actually behold the scenery of her visions, which so evidently recall the scenery of the Rhine and Moselle, in which her convent stood—did Julian of Norwich really see our Lord in a condition of bodily suffering? The answer evidently is that these and other similar visions correspond exactly to the symbolic image which frequently accompanies revived concepts. If I try to think of a tree or a house fixedly for a few moments, a vague

image of a particular tree or house comes into consciousness. If I dwell in thought on some abstract idea, a vague picture, which I clearly understand to be symbolic, comes into my mind. "Honour" suggests dimly a robe and crown; "virtue," an austere and beautiful figure; "humanity," the busy crowd in a London street. Or, sometimes, the mere image of the printed word may attach itself to the concept. In what sense are these images real—*i.e.*, how far do they correspond to something external? Evidently, they are real in virtue of their representation of the concept; they symbolise the sense-impressions from which the concept was originally derived. They are not immediate sense-impressions, and if reality is to be predicated only of such impressions neither mystical visions nor the countless reproduced images of memory on which our conscious life depends can be called real. But if reality lies, as it would appear to lie, in a true presentation to the mind in sense-images of the concept with which it is occupied, then certainly both may be rightly called real. St. Rose's ring was a true symbol of the idea connected

with it; the stigmata of St. Catherine were as real a symbol of her participation in the suffering of Christ as the visible ones of St. Francis; the scenery of St. Hildegard's visions, though no doubt primarily derived from her familiar surroundings, was, like the symbolic visions of the Apocalypse, made real by the reality of the ideas which they symbolised. The true fount of reality is throughout the concept; the thing thought or known, rather than the image perceived. The mystical visions derived their reality from the actual divine presence which called them up, just as the reality of a face or picture in the memory depends on the actual preservation of the concept, which is, so to speak, illustrated by the recalled image.

The same psychological discovery gives experimental confirmation to the distinction noted in the text (pp. 35, 36) between natural and supernatural states in which features of an approximately identical character occur; between the true mystical abstraction and the abnormal mental conditions brought about by natural causes, such as the prolonged contemplation of natural objects, pathological states or the use of

anæsthetics. The late Professor James considers that abnormal states of consciousness resulting from such causes are psychologically indistinguishable from "religious" or "classic" mysticism; and the agreement in detail, which is a marked feature in religious mysticism, and which Professor James regards as affording the strongest available support for its claims, is neutralised by the differences which are presented to view by mysticism of the non-religious kind. The claims of religious mysticism to supernatural causation are overthrown by the occurrence of similar states for which no such claim is or can be made. "Religious mysticism," Professor James says, "is only the half of mysticism; the other half has no accumulated traditions except those which the text-books on insanity supply." His conclusion is that there is a natural cosmic or mystical consciousness which responds to various stimulants, one of the chief of which is nitrous oxide gas. This form of consciousness is the only certain fact in mysticism, and though the claims of the higher or religious mysticism cannot be fully substantiated, it is, nevertheless,

possible to suppose that it opens the way to a "wider world of meanings, the counting in of which and the serious dealing with it might be indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth."

We may, as we have seen, fully admit the psychical identity of the process in every case. The question is as to the cause by which the process is initiated. If natural causes can be assigned for states in which the "cosmic consciousness" is brought into operation, can we rightly attribute the similar states of Christian mystics to a supernatural cause, or must we look for the cause among the non-mystical details of the mystic's ordinary experience? Our answer is that no such cause can be found, and we are consequently obliged, by a process of exhaustion, to accept the reality of the Christian mystics' experience, which they themselves attribute to it.

The psychological theory we have described asserts that the concept derived from sense-experience frequently perseveres in consciousness after the sense-experience itself has passed entirely out of consciousness. This concept

may accordingly be associated with other concepts, acquired in the same way, so as to produce ideas which have a particular aspect of their own unlike that of any one of their component elements taken by itself. Such a combination of concepts, together with their more or less appropriate sense-images, is familiar to everyone in dreams.

Now it appears certain that such conditions of "cosmic consciousness" as those cited by Professor James can be distinctly traced to their source in a sense-image, or sense-impression, together with the concept properly belonging to it. The sense-image drops out of consciousness for one reason or another, but the concept remains, and is combined with others already in the mind so as to produce a set of ideas which seem at first sight to belong to a sphere beyond the terrestrial one. But if our account of the matter is correct, the cosmic consciousness is not needed; the ordinary mental process is sufficient, in the peculiar circumstances of such cases, to account for the extraordinary experience. But in the experience of Christian mystics those peculiar circumstances

are absent; there is no external cause to which the "stimulation of the cosmic consciousness" can be attributed, neither anæsthetic, nor opium, nor brain pressure nor optical strain. We are therefore forced to the conclusion that the psychic process has been initiated by a cause which does not belong to the sphere of sense-experience, but is capable of producing concepts in the mind without any initiatory stimulation of the senses; in other words, by direct divine illumination.

An examination of the different instances given by Professor James of the arousing of "cosmic consciousness" will fully bear out this contention. They would seem to show, beyond possibility of doubt, that the "cosmic consciousness" is nothing whatever but the natural capacity of the mind for purely conceptual thought, apart from any sense-image, and its further capacity, above mentioned, for associating concepts to form a single mental content, together with sense-images evoked from memory as the support of the associated concepts. The cosmic consciousness is, in fact, what we have elsewhere described as

the natural tendency of the mind to mysticism—a tendency which may be exploited in various directions, but which attains to true mystical contemplation only by divine illumination. The cases cited are the following.

Only that part of each account is quoted which indicates the sensorial origin of the abnormal state.

1. The late Lord Tennyson. "I have frequently had a kind of waking trance. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were, out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve into boundless being."

Here the attention was fixed on the subjective consciousness of self, until from overstrain the individual characteristics were obliterated, and only the concept of being, which they had exemplified, remained in consciousness.

2. The late Canon Kingsley. "When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it." This

state of mind, which is really a very common one, signifies merely the mutual weakening by multiplicity of the sensible images, and a corresponding rise in clearness of their conceptual factors, which again are too numerous to be distinctly grasped in one mental act.

3. The late J. A. Symonds. "Suddenly, at church, or in company, or when I was reading, and always when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our self. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract self. The universe became without form and void of content." This is an excellent description of the process in which the sense-images fade, while the concept of self, still connected, perhaps, with internal sensations, persists. A long sermon, or dull company, or an uninteresting book, will produce the same effect in most minds, from time to time. It is merely the first stage of sleep.

4. An "anæsthetic revelation," presenting

exactly the same essential features as the above three cases. "'The one remains, the many change and pass'; and each and everyone of us *is* the one that remains." The anæsthetic has approximately the same effect as prolonged contemplation of self, or of a number of fixed natural objects, and as enforced quiescence amid surroundings incapable of fixing the attention.

5. A "mystical experience with chloroform" of J. A. Symonds, with features of a more varied and startling nature than those already noted, but of the same essential character. "After the choking and stifling had passed away . . . suddenly, my soul became aware of God, who was manifestly dealing with me, handling me, so to speak, in an intense personal present reality. I cannot describe the ecstasy that I felt. As I gradually awoke from the influence of the anæsthetics, the old sense of my relation to the world began to return, the new sense of my relation to God began to fade. . . . I flung myself on the ground, and at last awoke, covered with blood, &c."

Here the "dealing with" and "handling" were

evidently the surgeons' ; they were imperfectly perceived in the state of partial anæsthesia, but served to awaken the concept of objective power and subjective helplessness which were already associated in the patient's mind with the idea of God. The "ecstatic" feeling is readily traceable to the same cause, an imperfectly felt nerve-stimulation.

6. "I know an officer in our police force who has told me that many times when off duty and on his way home in the evening there comes to him a vivid and vital realisation of his oneness with the Infinite Power, and the Spirit of Peace takes hold of and fills him." No one would grudge the worthy policeman his sense of freedom and peace at the end of his monotonous day's work. But it is extravagantly superfluous to invoke the cosmic consciousness to explain it.

7. An instance of the power of nature, in certain aspects, to awaken mystical moods. "I was alone upon the sea-shore . . . and now again, as once before in the Alps of Dauphiné, I was impelled to kneel down, this time before the illimitable ocean, symbol of the Infinite. I

felt that I knew now what prayer really is; to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is."

The passage from a particular sense-image to concepts directly and indirectly associated with it is here too clear to need comment.

8. A similar instance. "One brilliant Sunday morning my wife and boys went to the Unitarian Chapel—while I went further up into the hills with my stick and dog. For nearly an hour I walked along the road to the 'Cat and Fiddle,' and then returned. On the way back, suddenly I felt that I was in heaven." Obviously this was the result of a medley of sense-impressions, none of them especially striking, but all combined with silence, light, fresh air and a sense of general well-being to produce a vivid concept, and correspondingly to weaken particular sense-impressions: heaven was really the composite idea aroused by the Unitarian Chapel, the hills, light, air and gentle exercise.

9. Another "anæsthetic revelation." "A great Being or Power was travelling through the sky: his foot was on a kind of lightning

made entirely of the spirits of innumerable people, and I was one of them. I seemed to be directly under the foot of God, and he was grinding his own life up out of my pain. He bended me, turning his corner by means of my hurt, hurting me more than ever I had been hurt in my life, and at the acutest point of this, as he passed, I *saw*. I understood for a moment things that I have now forgotten, things that no one could remember while retaining sanity. While regaining consciousness I wondered why, since I had gone so deep, I had seen nothing of what the saints call the *love* of God, nothing but his relentlessness. Then I heard an answer, saying, 'Knowledge and Love are one, and the measure is suffering.' With that I came to, and I saw that what would be called the 'cause' of my experience was a slight operation under insufficient ether, in a bed pushed up against a window." This is the most interesting of Professor James's citations, inasmuch as it presents a feature which seems to be identical with one of the characteristics of true mystical experience, viz., an indescribable intellectual

communication or vision. We may admit the possibility that this part of the experience may be truly mystical. But it is only a possibility of the barest kind. The more salient features are, it is evident, to be referred directly to the imperfect action of the anæsthetic, and its effect on the nervous system, the pain of the operation and the light from the adjacent window. This consideration would absolutely preclude the acceptance of such an experience as certainly mystical, however strong its resemblance to real mystical states might be.

10. There remains only one more of Professor James's instances to be quoted, and this is not the description of experience, but the opinion of a Canadian psychiatrist, with which Professor James seems, on the whole, to agree. "Cosmic consciousness is not simply an expansion or extension of the self-conscious mind, with which we are all familiar, but the superaddition of a function distinct from any possessed by the average man. The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos; that is, of the life and order of the universe." Here is very plainly shown the

root of the whole misunderstanding. "Cosmic consciousness," as we have seen, is not indeed an expansion of the ordinary operation of the mind; but neither is it the super-addition of anything. It is the aptitude, possessed by all minds in a greater or less degree, for contemplating ideas apart from images. What is thought to be the arousing of the cosmic consciousness is merely the realisation of the object of contemplation, for the moment, as an imageless idea. The distinction is made very clear by the last sentence quoted. Cosmic consciousness certainly *should* be consciousness of the cosmos as it is here said to be. But in the same sentence it is declared to be something quite different—the "life and order of the universe"; that is to say, not the actual cosmos at all, but an abstract idea which may be, and in fact is, derived from close investigation of any fragment of the universe, however tiny. Life and order are ideas, not things: they are not capable of extension or division, and may be abstracted as perfectly from the consideration of a drop of water as from superhuman knowledge of a world.

All that Professor James's quotations and arguments, and others like them, have shown, is that mystical experience implies nothing contrary to the nature of the human soul. Man has only one consciousness, and it is not cosmic, but merely conceptual; but under the divine assistance it can and does reach heights to which the unilluminated imagination cannot follow it.

The abnormal but natural states of consciousness shew three constant and apparently inseparable features. First, a direct sense-experience, next, the conceptual element in that experience, dissociated from its sensational basis, and thirdly, a middle term consisting in some artificially induced physical condition to which the dissociation is to be attributed. This last may be either a condition of alcoholic or other intoxication, a hypnotic or hypnoidal state brought about by contemplation of surrounding objects, or a state of excitement, exhilaration or exaltation due to personal influences. In mystical contemplation there is, as a rule, no direct sense-experience which can be supposed to form the basis of the merely conceptual state

of consciousness, and there are no external circumstances to which the peculiar physical condition involved in mystical experience can be traced. The conceptual object of mystical contemplation must therefore be of purely immaterial, that is to say, of supernatural, origin; and the abnormal physical and mental condition of the mystic must be referred to the same cause; the absence of any sensational element in the mental content is not the consequence of the supernatural state, as it is of the natural one, but its cause.

It may be finally contended that religious ideas, which are mostly conceptual in character, may, if constantly dwelt on, as they admittedly are by mystics, have a natural tendency to bring on a kind of hypnoidal state manifesting the special characteristics of mystical experience. But this hypothesis requires evidence in its support, and there is none forthcoming. If it is admitted, however, it practically concedes the whole position. For, in fact, it attributes to religious ideas a unique potency which is susceptible of no other explanation than that given by mystics.

APPENDIX II

NOTES

Page 35, line 13.—For "necessarily occurs in" *read* "originates."

"I went at once to my confessor in great distress to tell him of it (*sc.* a vision of Christ). He asked in what form I saw our Lord. I told him I saw no form. He then said, "How did you know that it was Christ?" I replied that I did not know how I knew it, but I could not help knowing that He was close beside me, that I saw Him distinctly and felt His presence."—*Life of St. Teresa* (Macmillan, 1875).

Page 93, note.—See *Summa*, Suppl. xcii. 1.

Page 94, note.—Compare *Harphius. Myst. Theol.* 4, 60. "Est modus quidam supereminens vitæ contemplativæ talis qui quamvis non claro contuitu Dei essentiam intellectui demonstret, ipsum tamen consequentes simplici puritate spiritus, peramorosam reverentiam et claram diligentiam in Deum elevati revelata facie in præsentia

divinæ majestatis devoto familiarique colloquio ac confidentia perseverat sibi faciem illam amabilem ostendi flagitantis."

Page 95, note.—See *Summa*, 2^a, $2^æ$, clxxv. 3, 4.

Page 191, note.—Comp. St. Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, chap. xx. "From this rich spring come rivers: some great, some small ones, and sometimes little pools for children; this is sufficient for them, since they would be frightened if they beheld a great body of water; these are persons who are yet only in their rudiments—In this way the water of consolation will never be wanting."

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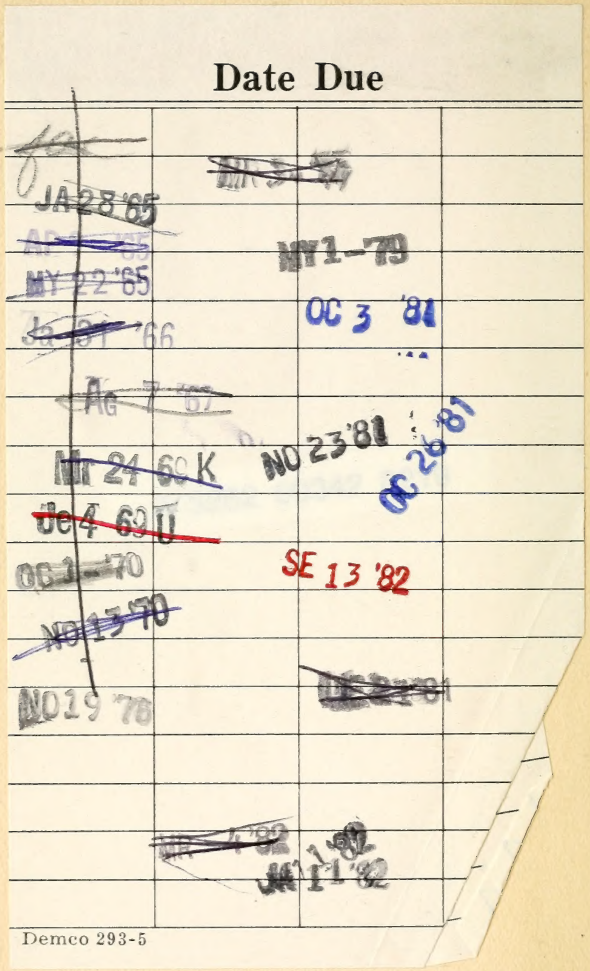
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